

“All we want is our freedom”

An intersectional approach to Kurdish lives in Istanbul

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Abstract

How do young Kurds experience life in Turkey's largest city Istanbul? This question, coupled with a gender perspective leading to a focus on young women, was the outset of this dissertation. Within the context of the ongoing conflict between the Kurdish minority and the Turkish state, what I describe and analyse is the everyday lives of differently situated young Kurds in Istanbul. The dissertation is based on a seven month fieldwork in Istanbul. I describe how the Kurds in Istanbul communicate their Kurdish identity through a set of common symbols, creating a sense of belonging and commitment to 'the Kurdish struggle'. These symbols of community are: (1) Kurdish language as an 'imagined mother tongue', (2) Kurdistan, (3) village life, (4) those who died for the cause, and (5) the concept of 'our freedom'. Applying an intersectional perspective, I explore how these symbols of collective identity naturalise the difference of power within the group, while obscuring differences deriving from individual positionings on grids of power connected to other social divisions, such as gender, age, level of education, or economic status.

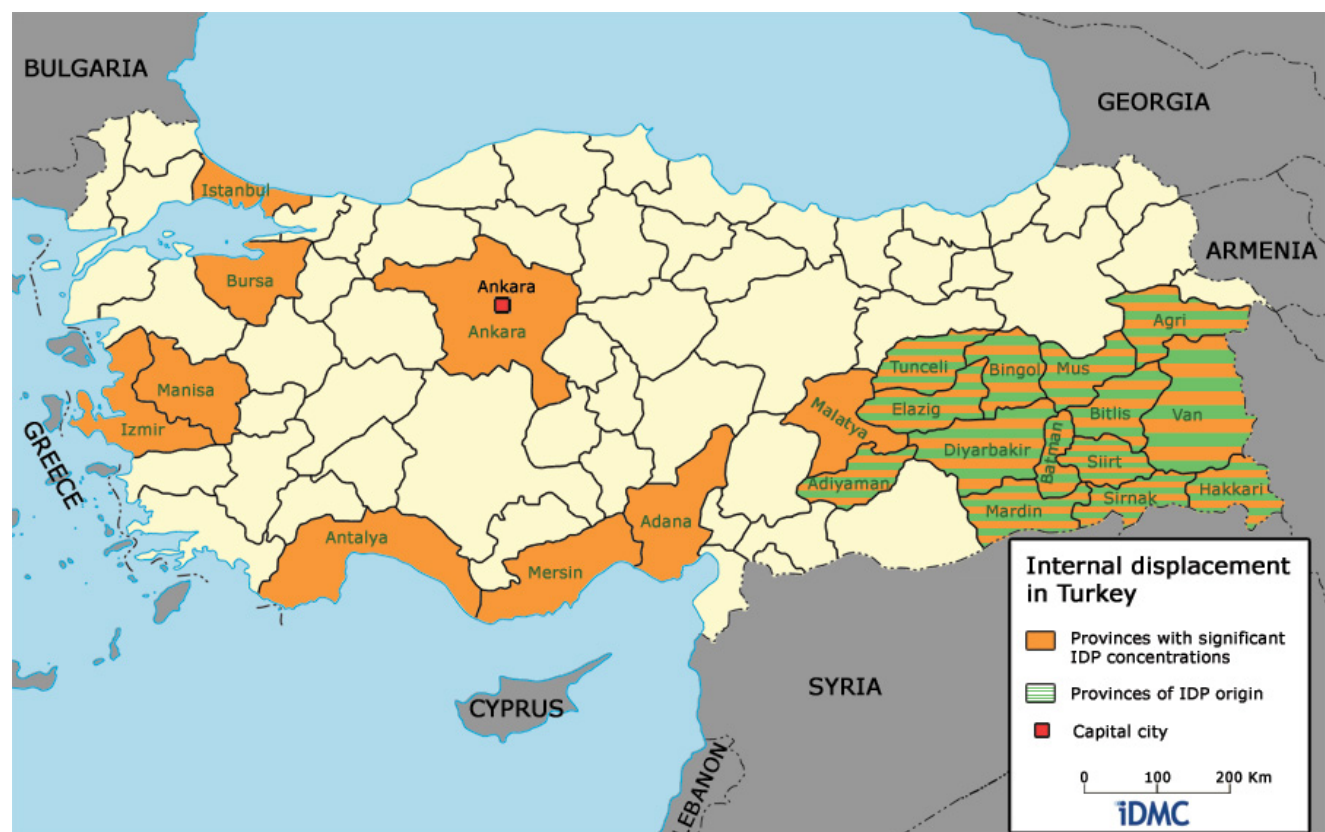
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Katrine Ree Holmøy

Map of the Republic of Turkey and its Kurdish regions.



Map showing the movements of migrants from the Kurdish dominated areas in the South-East to the bigger cities in the South-East and in the west of Turkey:

Source: *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre*.
[http://www.internaldisplacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/2997A AFC50626566C12571800053D66B/\\$file/Displacement-Turkey-green-s.jpg](http://www.internaldisplacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/2997A AFC50626566C12571800053D66B/$file/Displacement-Turkey-green-s.jpg)

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1

Introduction

How do young Kurds experience life in Turkey's largest city Istanbul? This question, coupled with a gender perspective leading to a focus on young women, was the outset of this dissertation. Within the context of the ongoing conflict between the Kurdish minority and the Turkish state, what I describe and analyse is the everyday lives of differently situated young Kurds in Istanbul. How do they handle being born into an oppressed group with ethno-nationalist aspirations? In what ways is being part of the Kurdish community made relevant in their lives, and does it affect their opportunities? And – does being Kurdish affect differently situated Kurds in the same ways? According to Houston interest in the “reconstitution of Kurdish identity in the metropolis” (2001:1) has been wanting in academic analysis of the ‘Kurdish question’ in Turkey, while the explosion of Kurdish immigrants to the major Turkish situation is well documented: Little is known about the Kurdish experience in the rapidly growing big cities of Turkey (Houston 2001:1).

During seven months of fieldwork in Istanbul, from January to August 2005, I got to know and take part in the lives of young Kurds and their families and friends in what is claimed to be the biggest Kurdish city in the world (Houston 2001). As I will show, the assimilation policies of the Turkish state affect most aspects of their lives.

Using intersectional theory as my framework, I analyse how Kurdish ethnic identity is intermeshed with other social divisions such as gender, level of education,

migration status and economic status, and how being Kurdish is experienced differently and has different consequences for my differently situated informants.

Group construction and maintenance

“All we want is our freedom”. This was a statement I heard from many of my Kurdish informants during my fieldwork in Istanbul. Two main questions derive from it: How is this ‘we’ perceived and constructed, and what does ‘freedom’ imply? During my fieldwork I tried to figure out how the large, multifarious Kurdish population in Istanbul maintain a sense of a shared Kurdish identity. There is as much diversity among the everyday lives of my Kurdish informants as there is diversity among individual Kurds and Turks that I got to know during my fieldwork. What marks the boundary between the Turkish and Kurdish groups is not necessarily differences between individual members, but rather the ways in which they perceive themselves and each other (Cohen 1985).

My informants come from different backgrounds and lead different lives in Istanbul, and part of my analysis concerns the ways in which individual Kurds partake in *production of ethnic identity for oneself* in their everyday lives (1994:76): Cohen emphasises the symbolic boundaries of ethnic and national communities, communities being defined as “...a group of people [that] (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups” (Cohen 1985:12). He suggests looking at a group’s boundaries as a way of examining the nature of community, referring to Barth’s (1969) introduction to “Ethnic groups and boundaries”. Boundaries that mark the end of a community are necessary, according to Cohen, because these boundaries encapsulate the *identity* of the community. Boundaries, being based on a claim of difference by at least one of the parties distinguished by the boundary (Cohen 1994:63), are relevant in meetings with members of other communities, underlining the relational aspect of group belonging (Cohen 1985).

These symbolic boundaries, existing predominantly in the mind of their beholders, may be perceived in different terms “not only by people on opposite sides of it, but also by people on the same side” (Cohen 1985:12). Both individual Kurds, from the inside, and Turks or other observers on the outside, may choose interpretations of these symbolic boundaries that fit their general view of the world.

Cohen argues that this aspect is the most important one in order to understand the importance of communities in people's lives. His perspective is valuable in terms of understanding the sense of unity among the Kurdish population in Istanbul. It is a framework for understanding both the feeling of sameness and the realities of diversity that my informants portray, and I will analyse this by way of five symbols of Kurdish community used by my informants: (1) Kurdish language; (2) Kurdistan, the 'homeland' of the Kurds; (3) those who gave their life in the conflict, (4) village life, and (5) the concept of 'our freedom'.

The need for recognition

The Kurds in Turkey have since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 been the target of a politics of assimilation (McDowal 1997, Mojab 2001, Bozarslan 2003). The Turkish state has not acknowledged their existence as a minority, and has denied them cultural and linguistic rights. It is within this context that the Kurdish identity has survived for the better part of the last century. The ongoing struggle for what my informants generally refer to as 'our freedom', in this context implies the Kurdish resistance against the hegemony of the Turkish nation-state. This historical and political framing is important when trying to understand the broader context of the Kurdish identity as it is articulated in my informants' everyday lives.

The ongoing struggle for recognition of the Kurds takes the form of 'identity politics': the political claim for recognition and rights is based on identity and group belonging (Comaroff 1996). This may lead to a reification of the culture in question, constructing identities within the terms of a specific political project: the claim for recognition of the rights of the Kurds, depends crucially on the existence of a Kurdish community that is perceived as culturally different from the Turkish majority. Does this discourse of identity politics create a "right" way in which to be Kurdish? Yuval-Davis (2006) argues that the discourse of identity politics might render invisible the experiences of the more marginal members of the Kurdish community. Through the ways in which their Kurdish identity is made relevant in the lives of my informants, I analyse to what extent the Kurdish identity becomes the relevant one, and how it is articulated in relation to their various other positionings, like gender, class and age.

Ethnic group or nation?

The Kurds are often defined as a nation, or a 'non-state nation', both by themselves and by those who sympathise with their political claims (eg. Mojab 2001, McDowal 1997, Vali 2003). Their homeland: Kurdistan, an area spread-eagled over Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria where the majority of the world's Kurds still live (Mc Dowall 1997). The governments of these four countries have different ways of relating to their Kurdish population. The Turkish government barely acknowledges their mere existence as a group. In the case of the Kurds in Turkey, labelling of the group is fundamentally contested: Considering the Kurds either a nation or an ethnic group has consequences for the manner in which the group of people calling themselves Kurds are perceived in an age of politics of identity (Comaroff 1996:178).

Placing the label of ethnic group or nation is not only a theoretical exercise; it is also a political statement regarding the legitimacy of the Kurds' claims to territory or to linguistic and cultural rights:

If nations are not to be identified with 'nation-states', one must ask if there are any 'objective' characteristics according to which nations can be recognized. This question is not purely theoretic, given the wide consensus, affirmed by the United Nations, regarding 'the right of nations to self-determination'.

Yuval-Davis 1997:18

In this paper, the terms 'ethnic group' and 'nation' will both be used, as I find them both appropriate for the Kurdish population in Turkey. This is not only a result of analytical difficulties in deciding which term is 'correct'; from a constructivist point of view, the similarities are greater than the differences (Comaroff 1996, Vermeulen and Govers 1994, Eriksen 1992, Eriksen 2002). Nations and ethnic groups are historical constructions, and the difference between the two is larger in the emic, insider understanding of the terms, than from an analytical point of view. Vermeulen and Govers (1994:6) consider both ethnic and national identity as constructed, but they argue that national identity is literally *more* constructed, through the historical and cultural myths of continuity and sameness constructed by politicians, historians and folklorists. Both terms imply what has been referred to as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983), and the ways of constructing and maintaining a sense of group relationship are largely the same within the two mind frames. However, the

pool of potential symbolism of a nation is more closely linked with the group's connection to solid ground, to a geographical area (Comaroff 1996:175).

Rather than asking what is 'ethnic' about an ethnic group, Vermeulen and Govers (1994) ask what makes an ethnic group *different* from other types of groups. They claim that what sets ethnic groups apart is their belief in and feeling of common culture, as well as an ideology of common descent.

Using Comaroff's (1996:176) term the Kurds may be labelled an 'ethno-nationalist' group, or, in Eriksen's words, a proto-nation (1992:326/2002:14-15). But, as many collectivities officially labelled 'ethnic groups' consider themselves nations, the labelling of groups are simultaneously competitions over political hegemony (Eriksen 1992:315). The main difference is that labelling a group 'a nation', whether done by members of the group or actors outside it, implies a judgment of the group's relationship with a particular geographical area, and thus can be used to strengthen or weaken a groups claims for self-governance.

The interior landscapes of the group

Choosing to focus on the Kurds in Istanbul, I simultaneously decided to choose my informants based on one aspect of their identity, the ethnic or national aspect. However, my informants are positioned according to several other social divisions in society. In this part, I present intersectionalism as my theoretical framework. I claim that this framework enables me to take a closer look at the *internal differences* among my Kurdish informants. How important is their ethnic identity in their everyday lives, and does being Kurdish have the same consequences for all those who identify themselves as Kurds? By using intersectional theory I ask (1) which are the main differentiating factors within the boundaries of the Kurdish community in Istanbul, and (2) is ethnic identity more defining for my informants than gender, age, class, or level of education? I apply the intersectional perspective aiming to identify the multiple positionings constituting the everyday life of my informants, the social divisions and power relations central to their situations (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006).

Yuval-Davis argues that "[g]ender, ethnicity and class, although with different ontological bases and separate discourses, are intermeshed in each other and articulated by each other in concrete social relations. They cannot be seen as additive and no one of them can be prioritized abstractly" (Yuval-Davis 1997:7). This outlines

the core of what has been referred to as an intersectional view of power relations and group formations: each individual is, through gender, age, class, religion, and ethnic or national belonging, in a crossroads of intersecting power grids, each influencing the person's life and freedom of choice. In order not to "compartmentalize oppressions", letting one differentiating factor, in this case ethnicity, be the sole explanation for lives differently led, it is necessary that all these elements are kept in mind while analyzing constructions of national or ethnic identities (Yuval-Davis 1997:8). The intersectional approach offers a more complex ontology than approaches focusing on one social category at a time (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006).

In the context of the Turkish assimilation politics and the ongoing conflict between the Workers Party of Kurdistan, PKK, and the Turkish state, displays of Kurdish identity are in most cases seen as resistance to the state policies, and they are sanctioned on several levels. The oppression of the Kurds in Turkey operates on several levels, and, as I will show, displaying Kurdish identity in the wrong context may have dire consequences. However, my informants' various experiences of oppression are constructed and intermeshed in more than one social division, and this oppression is not equally experienced, nor equally handled, by my differently situated informants. As I will show, the power grids of the social divisions of gender, economic status, age, level of education, and migration status are also at work (Yuval-Davis 2006). Explaining the oppressions experienced by my informants solely by their belonging to the ethnic group of Kurds, would render invisible the workings of the other social divisions in which my informants are positioned.

I have already presented a constructionist approach to ethnic and national identities. In dealing with the "different kinds of difference" I follow Yuval-Davis (2006) who sees all social divisions as socially constructed. She suggests that gender should be understood as "a mode of discourse that relates to groups of subjects whose social roles are defined by their sexual/biological difference" (Yuval-Davis 2006:201). Age is understood as representing the dimension of time and the life cycle, including the ways individuals' positioning on various social divisions may change during their lives.

The aspects of 'economic status' that have been most relevant among my informants is whether or not they have an income and control their own money, as well as their housing arrangements, while the level of education is important both for

linguistic skills and knowledge of the cultural codes of the Turkish majority population.

The religious aspect has not been a focus in this dissertation. My informants, like the majority of Kurds, all follow Sunni Islam (McDowall 1997:10). Sunni Islam is the most common religion among Kurds and Turks in Istanbul alike, and was never brought up by my informants as connected with the Kurdish identity.¹

More than what's in the mind

While introducing this constructivist approach to social divisions, including ethnic and national collective identities, it is important to emphasise that the constructed character of ethnic or national identities in no way makes these identities fictional. Though an analysis may reveal that divisions between groups emerge and disappear through history, and that the similarities between groups may be more convincing than the alleged differences, this does not mean that the group belonging is fake or unimportant. As Benhabib expresses it:

Sociological constructivism does not suggest that cultural differences are shallow or somehow unreal or “fictional”. Cultural differences run very deep and are very real. The imagined boundaries between them are not phantoms in deranged minds; imagination can guide human action and behaviour as well as any other cause of human action.

(Benhabib 2002:8)

Thus, in analysing ethnic or national identities as constructed, it is crucial not to neglect their importance in people's lives.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that differences between groups often appear on more levels than the symbolic. The historical emergences and disappearances of ethnic and national identities, are often coupled with differences in access to resources or institutions of power. Comaroff (1996) warns that a radical constructivist approach to ethnicity and nationalism may lead to neglecting the complexity of political fields of power, as well as the physical and material basis of the constructions of ethnicity and national ideology and identity: This must be part of the analysis, while holding on to the constructionist approach.

¹ What would have been interesting is to explore the relationship between Sunni and Alevi Kurds (Bruinessen 1996, Houston 2001, McDowall 1997). However, none of my informants identified themselves as Alevi.

2

Creating Turkey

The Kurds are often referred to as the world's largest "non-state nation" (e.g. Mojab 2001), and today the area that was almost seceded to the Kurds in the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, is divided between the modern states of Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq. The institutional and political frames of the lives lived in each of these countries are different, though the suppression of cultural and linguistic rights have been documented in all four countries (McDowal 1997, Mojab 2001, Kreyenbroeck and Sperl 1992, Zubaida 1992). Outlining the context of my fieldwork in Istanbul, I will focus on the situation within what has since 1923 been the republic of Turkey. Until 1923 this area was part of the Ottoman Empire, which collapsed in the years before and during World War I (Ahmad 2004).

Uniting Father State and Mother Nation

The Ottoman Empire was widespread and multifarious; its ever contested and ever moving boundaries encapsulating numerous groups of different religion and language. It was upon this foundation that the Republic of Turkey was created. The creation of the republic was accompanied by a process of creating the Turks. The variety of ethnic and religious groups that were more or less peacefully coexisting during the Ottoman era, one of these groups already identifying themselves as Turks, was to become a unified nation of Turks (Ahmad 2004, Delaney 1995, Benhabib and Isiksel 2006). The 1980 constitution states:

The Turkish state, with its territory and nation, is an indivisible entity. Its language is Turkish. (Article 3.1)²

The concept of the nation-state implies correspondence between the geographical borders and the national identity of the people living within the country's borders. This is virtually everywhere a fiction (Yuval-Davis 1997, Eriksen 1992, 2002). One effect of this fiction is to allow one group, in this case the Turks, access to power over ideological apparatuses, of both state and civil society. It serves to "naturalize the hegemony of one collectivity" (Yuval-Davis 1997:11). The process of nation-building in Turkey from the beginning of the 20th century, is important as the frame within which the Kurdish identity production has existed for almost a century.

Mustafa Kemal played a key role in wresting the area that is now the Republic of Turkey from the Great Powers by the end of World War I. But gaining power over the area, and being elected as the country's first president, was not enough; His intention was to create a modern, secular nation-state after a western model, and that meant changing the identity and sense of belonging of the citizens of the new republic (Ahmad 2004). Delaney (2005) analyses how Kemal used the concepts of Father State (*Devlet Baba*) and Motherland (*Anavatan*) to convey the new, Turkish national identity to the country's citizens (Delaney 1995:177): While *Father State* initially meant the Ottoman rule, both patriarchal and paternalistic, *Motherland* was a generalised medium of nurture, under control of the state, but without specific boundaries or identity. According to Delaney the concepts of Father State and Motherland are well known among all Turks, as were they to peoples living under Ottoman rule: These notions were not invented with the Republic of Turkey, they were simply used in a new way by Mustafa Kemal, who drew explicitly on them when creating the nation of Turkey from parts of the pluralistic Ottoman Empire.

People were familiar with the notions of nation and state, but these did not go together naturally; indeed, in certain circumstances they could be seen as opposed. ... The power and success of the nationalist movement was due, I believe not only to Mustafa Kemal's military strategy but also to his rhetorical strategy. He *refigured the imaginative terrain as he sought to redefine the physical*.

Delaney 1995:179

² The Constitution of the Republic of Turkey can be read here:
<http://www.byegm.gov.tr/mevzuat/anayasa/anayasa-ing.htm>

In order to achieve his plans for Turkey, Mustafa Kemal communicated his ideas in a language familiar to those he wanted to persuade, the language of the family. To top it off, Mustafa Kemal himself in 1934 took the name Atatürk, literally “Father Turk” (Ahmad 2004).

Delaney argues that the language of kinship is commonplace, and easy to dismiss as “merely metaphoric” when used outside the context of kinship (Delaney 1995), and therefore powerful: The very fact that kinship and family relationships are easily perceived as natural, makes kinship terms useful for *naturalizing* other forms of power, an argument resembling that of Bourdieu (2000) which I address below.

The use of kinship terms on the public and much larger collectivity of the nation-state, is facilitated by a common factor, namely the way one normally enters both collectivities: one is born into it (Delaney 1995). From this perspective, these different sorts of identity are constructed in similar ways: The kinship terminology makes the nation-state appear as a natural unit, leaving invisible the internal hierarchies and stratifications, and obscuring the gendered difference of access to power. The terminology simultaneously puts a lid on the differing interests of differently situated members of the group.

The fusion of gender, sexuality, and kinship and the “forgetting” of the different structural places each person occupies within the image of the unified family is comparable on the personal level to that required of different groups by the inclusive rhetoric of nationalism.

Delaney 1995:178

The role that the symbolism of mother and father played in the conception of the nation-state of Turkey suggests that the very notion of the nation-state is in itself gendered, and therefore the gender inequalities vis-à-vis the nation can be understood as inherent in the notion of the nation (Delaney 1995:178).

Emergence of Kurdish nationalism

Hassanpour (2003) and Vali (2003) both argue that Kurdish nationalism emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century, in parallel with the emergence of Turkish, Persian and Arab identities. According to Hassanpour, the concept of the Kurdish nation and national identity are best understood as responses to the constructions of national identity which have accompanied formation and consolidation of the modern

nation-states of Turkey, Iraq and Iran since the end of the First World War, leading to the partition of what is referred to as Kurdistan: “The denial of Kurdish identity and the destruction of civil society in Kurdistan were the necessary conditions of the construction of a uniform national identity in these multi-ethnic nation-states” (2003:104) Thus, he argues, Kurdish nationalism is a response to the denial of Kurdish identity.

The borders of the region referred to as Kurdistan were not problematised until the beginning of the twentieth century, when the emergence of nation-states established impermeable borders in the region. During the Turkish War of Independence the Kurdish traditional elite was relatively pro-Kemalist (Bozarslan 2003).

Mustafa Kemal led what became a national liberation movement of the Turks. Ahmad (2004) points out that the Turkish words for nation, nationalism and nationalist, *millet*, *milli* and *milletçi*, initially referred to more than ethnic Turks. Kemal even explicitly established that the national border of Turkey contained more than merely Turks:

Within these borders there are Turks, Circassians, and other Islamic elements. Thus this border is a national boundary of all those who live together totally blended and are for all intents and purpose made up of fraternal communities.

From Mustafa Kemal’s speech in October 1919, quoted in Ahmad 2004:80

The last Ottoman parliament adopted the borders drawn in the National Pact presented by Kemal on 17 February 1920, and two days later discussed the meaning of the term *Türk*; Turk. They agreed that *Türk* included all the different Muslim elements inside the borders of Turkey, and Kemal again made explicit what he intended to be the identity of the inhabitants of the new republic: “What is intended here ... is not only Turks, not only Circassians, not only Kurds, not only Lazs, but the Islamic ethnic elements of all of these, a sincere community” (cited in Ahmad 2003:81). In short, the term *Türk* came to mean not only the already existing ethnic group of Turks, but all Muslims living inside the borders of the new Turkey.

As Benhabib and Isiksel (2006) explain, this is part of the reason why Kurds still have problems being acknowledged as a minority: The vast majority of the Kurds are Muslim, and therefore officially included in the category labelled *Türk*. According to Ahmad this was an attempt at being inclusive and patriotic rather than exclusive and nationalist. Still, this laid the foundation of a Turkish nationalism based on the

assumption that all people living in Turkey are Turks, and, coupled with the language policy of the new republic, it became the starting point for denying the right to speak other languages than Turkish, and forbidding expressions of cultural or ethnic identities other than Turkish. By the end of the 1930s, the nationalist movement in Turkey had managed to unify the majority of the population in a common Turkish identity. The Kurds did not respond to the call for change, largely because they spoke a different language than Turkish.

After the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the Kurds faced a strong, centralised Turkish state, and a process of nation-building disregarding their Kurdish identity. In 1924 the first Kurdish rebellions took place (ibid). The Kurdish resistance to the Turkish state has existed in various forms over the last century, since 1984 mainly articulated by the PKK.

The Turkish 'Refolution'

The term 'refolution', a mix of reform and revolution, is used by Benhabib and Isiksel (2006) to describe the changes and reforms Turkey has been going through during the last years in its attempt to meet the Copenhagen Criteria and achieve EU accession. Turkey first applied for membership in what is today the European Union in 1959, but it is only in recent years that membership has come close to realisation.³ The Copenhagen Criteria, defining the requirements EU membership, include: (1) *stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities*; (2) *the existence of a functioning market economy, as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union*; and (3) *the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union*.⁴ A report from 2003 stated that although Turkey had not yet fulfilled these criteria, they had shown great progress (Benhabib and Isiksel 2006). But, the report specifically mentions Turkey's reservation regarding Article 27 of the UN's *Covenant of Civil and Political*

³ On 3 October 2005, membership negotiations were symbolically opened with Turkey and on 12 June 2006 the examination and assessment of the *acquis communautaire* began. However, on 8 November 2006 the Commission issued its progress report on Turkey, critical to , among other things, the treatment of the country's ethnic minorities. The report can be read here: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2006/Nov/tr_sec_1390_en.pdf.

⁴ The criteria for accession can be read here: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/enlargement_process/accesion_process/criteria/index_en.htm

*Rights:*⁵ This article grants ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities the right to pursue their culture, religion, and language, a right that would have a fundamental impact on the Kurdish question in the country.

Still, the new and rewritten laws have established new arenas for the display of Kurdish identity: during the period from 2001 to 2004, the Constitution has been amended extensively, and eight legislative “harmonization packages” were passed. The 2004 change of the constitution established the supremacy of the international human rights convention over domestic law. However, a culture of national security continues to dominate parts of Turkey’s political life, restricting the freedom of speech, publication, and communication, and inhibiting a development towards recognition of the rights of minorities (Benhabib and Isiksel 2006).

Kurdish migration and internal displacement

The Kurdish population in Istanbul is largely a result of twenty years of armed conflict in the Kurdish region, between the PKK and the Turkish government. In 1974, the PKK, Kurdistan Workers’ Party, was founded by Abdullah Öcalan with the goal of establishing an independent and democratic Kurdish state, Kurdistan.⁶ After gathering support in the Kurdish regions in the south-east, the PKK in 1984 began ambushing Turkish troops, setting off the armed conflict. After Öcalan was captured and sentenced to death in 1999, he gave up the idea of an independent Kurdish state: it seemed too hard to realise (Ergil 2000). There was internal dispute about this decision, but Öcalan’s intention was followed by the removal of the word Kurdistan from the political and military wings of the organization.⁷

There has been no negotiations between the two parties, and the unilateral cease-fires announced by the PKK have gone unnoticed by the Turkish government. After years of decline in violent acts, 2004 brought an increase in fighting as the 1999 unilateral cease-fire was abandoned. In 2005, at the time of my fieldwork, a sharp increase in the number of clashes was reported. The conflict has cost more than 30 000 lives in total.⁸

⁵ The Covenant of Civil and Political Rights can be found here:
<http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm>

⁶ See Uppsala University’s Conflict Database:
<http://www.pcr.uu.se/database/conflictSummary.php?bcID=194>

⁷ <http://www.pcr.uu.se/>

⁸ <http://www.pcr.uu.se/>

Due to the conflict between the Kurdish population and the Turkish majority, many Kurds have been forced to move from villages in the eastern part of Turkey to larger cities in the region, or to the western parts of the country. The *coup d'état* of 1980 was followed by PKK attacks, and increased the military pressure on the region, speeding up the migration process. Both the PKK and the government demanded that the villagers in the area pick sides, and entire mountain pastures were declared forbidden areas (The Middle East Report 1996/04⁹). This made people leave their homes in search of improved living conditions. In the 1990s, the situation deteriorated, as the gendarmerie¹⁰ and the regular army started evacuating villages by force, incinerating the villages to prevent people from returning (The Middle East Report 1996/04).

It is difficult to find reliable figures on the number of villages burnt and families forcibly displaced, and, even more difficult, how many moved “voluntarily” after having their subsistence threatened as the grasslands and fields in the region grew into war zones: All figures are contested. A 2002 report from GöçDer, a Turkish NGO working for the rights of those who were forced to migrate, estimate that 3438 rural settlements have been evacuated, and that 4–4.5 million Kurds have been resettled in the process (GöçDer report 1999-2001). A process that, according to GöçDer, “turned the social, economic, cultural and psychological structure of Turkey upside down”.

During the summer of 2005, the level of armed conflict was still rising. The organizations I met with in Diyarbakır, the largest city in the Kurdish regions, reported that new waves of rural migrants were reaching the outskirts of the city, adding to the already huge shantytown areas. This migration has pushed more families west, contributing to the growth of a Kurdish population in Istanbul. Several studies are analysing the consequences of this large scale migration (eg. Secor 2004, Çelik 2005 a and b).

It is within this historical and political framework that my informants live their daily lives, in a political climate where all overt displays of Kurdish identity is interpreted as an opposition to the Turkish unity.

⁹ The article, “Forced evictions and Destructions of Villages in Turkish Kurdistan” printed in The Middle East Report 1996/04 is an excerpt of a report by the Netherland Kurdistan Society. The version printed in The Middle East Report 1996/04 does not name an author.

¹⁰ A branch of the Turkish Armed Forces responsible for the maintenance of the public order in areas that fall outside the jurisdiction of police forces, generally in rural areas.

Previous research

Gathering knowledge about the Kurds in Turkey I have to a large degree turned to the works of historians (McDowall 1997, Bozarslan 2003, Hassanpour 2003, Klein 2001, Vali 2003), political scientists (Wedel 2001, Çelik 2005, Barkley and Fuller 1998, Watts 2004) and sociologists (Smits and Gündüz-Hoşgör 2003, Ergil 2000). Most of the anthropological literature on the Kurds focuses on the areas referred to as Kurdistan, where the majority of Kurds still live (Yalçın 1991, Bruinessen 1978, Barth 1953, Hansen 1961). Yalçın, claiming that the ethnographic documentation of the Kurds is wanting, went to Hakkari, in the south-east of Turkey close to the border of Iran and Iraq, which he refers to as “the stronghold of pure Kurdish tribes” to document how the Kurdish culture (1991:18). However, I find the literature on the Kurds *outside* the ‘strongholds’ of the Kurdish areas more lacking.

Houston (2001) argues that many of the more recent books on the Kurdish question are uninterested in ethnographic research and are obsessed with questions of geo-politics and international relations. After searching for ethnographical descriptions of the Kurds in Turkey, and the Kurds in Istanbul in particular, I have to agree: The works of Houston (2001), Wedel (2001) and Secor (2004) are the only works I have found attempting to describe the lives of Kurds in Istanbul, as well as the reconstitution of Kurdish identity in this Turkish metropolis. Houston (2001) attempts to describe the reconstitution of Kurdish identity in Istanbul through analysis of the lives of a Kurdish family which migrated to Istanbul in 1984 from a village close to Bitlis, a city in the Kurdish regions. Secor conducted interviews with Kurdish migrant women in Istanbul aiming to analyse citizenship and everyday spatial practices in Istanbul through narrative accounts. She focuses on how the Kurdish women resist the categories of “citizen” and “stranger” in Istanbul, and how the women create their “own Istanbul” by (Secor 2004:365). Wedel (2001) focuses on Kurdish migrant women in an Istanbul *gecekondu*, aiming to analyse their participation in local, political processes, and the obstacles preventing them to participate. She finds that the political participation of the *gecekondu* women is quite low. She argues that the women must be empowered in all aspects of their lives in, family relations, social values, education, the economic realm, the creation of new facilities in the quarters where women can have a public space of their own, in order to be able to participate in politics.

Mojab argues that “engaging in Kurdish women’s studies itself is a form of resistance against intellectual repression”, as the Kurds are excluded from Middle Eastern studies establishments, while Kurdish women are excluded from studies of middle eastern women (Mojab 2001:12). She sees a need for research on the lives of Kurdish women informed by feminist perspectives.

In this dissertation I focus on the everyday lives of young Kurds in Istanbul, and the majority of them are women. By doing this I hope to contribute to the knowledge of everyday life of ethnic conflict.

Newroz – displaying power relations

Comaroff sees identity, including ethnic identity, as relations; “their own content is wrought in the particularities of their ongoing historical construction” (1996:269). The relation between Kurds and Turks is tense throughout the history of the republic. Within the borders of Turkey, the Turkish majority constitutes the “relevant other” of the Kurdish minority; It is primarily in interaction with the Turkish majority that the borders of the Kurdish community is produced and reproduced (Barth 1969, Cohen 1985). However, living in, and getting to know, Istanbul can easily be done without noticing the existence of a Kurdish population, except for the occasional bomb blamed on the PKK, the official labelling of the Kurdish insurrection being “PKK terrorism” (Ergil 2000).

Though the Kurdish population in Istanbul has grown, the Kurds are not visible unless one knows where to look. Displays of Kurdish symbolism such as the colours red, green and yellow or Kurdish language, spoken or written, has been illegal, and is still not without consequences, both legal and social. The level of hostility and the lack of channels for dialogue between the Turkish majority and the Kurdish minority, makes displaying one’s Kurdish identity too openly a risky business. But once a year, Kurds gather to celebrate *Newroz* – also in Istanbul. My encounter with the Newroz celebration in 2005 may serve as an example of how the power relation between the Kurds and Turks is handled in public space and public opinion.

The celebration of Newroz has been illegal, and a potent symbol of Kurdish identity in Turkey. As late as in 1992, at least 70 people were killed in clashes between security forces and demonstrators, and in other years hundreds have been detained (Watts 2004). Since 2004, the Kurds in Turkey are allowed to celebrate Newroz, Kurdish New Year or the first day of spring, on March 21st. In Istanbul,

almost 100 000 people gathered to celebrate the 2005 Newroz in an open air venue at Zeytinburnu, between the city centre and the airport. During the 1980s the celebration of Newroz was closely linked to displays of power by the PKK (Bruinessen 1988), and the fact that the celebration is accepted by the Turkish authorities is in itself a sign that the Turkish government is starting to acknowledge the ethnic diversity in the country. Still, the context of the celebration sends a clear message to everyone participating, about who is really in charge.

Meeting up with Özlem, a Kurdish girl in her late 20s working in the Kurdish newspaper, we went by minibus to the venue. Those travelling with us were festive, singing Kurdish songs, laughing and talking. When we arrived, the area was surrounded by police; after waiting in lines, we were all searched before being let in to join the crowd. Police helicopters were patrolling the air above us.

There was a huge stage, with bands playing Kurdish music and politicians from Dehap, the Kurdish political party, addressing the crowd. The visual symbols of the Kurds were all over: people wore red, yellow and green ribbons around their heads, they carried huge pictures of men lost or killed, huge posters hung from the trees, and many carried posters with photographs of Abdullah Öcalan. People were shouting “Vîje Apo”, long live Abdullah Öcalan in Kurmanji, the most commonly known of the Kurdish languages. Some of the women wore long, colourful dresses and the traditional cotton headscarves with small, embroidered flowers around the edges. Some of the men had brought their *saz* or other instrument to play Kurdish music. All around us, people danced a traditional Kurdish dance where a long row of people link their little fingers and repeat the steps of the person in the lead, who with his or her free hand waves a small scarf to the rhythm of the music.

Those of us who were not in pretty dresses wore large coats or winter jackets as protection from the merciless winds from the Marmara Sea. March 21st may be the first day of spring, but the trees were bare, and the grey fog from where the Marmara meets the Bosphorus was chilling to the bone.

The Newroz-celebration was the only overt, public display of Kurdish identity and community I witnessed during my seven months of fieldwork. There are, as I will get back to, many Kurdish arenas more or less hidden throughout the entire city of Istanbul. Public displays of Kurdish identities like this, however, are far from the norm. Exhibiting the Kurds as a group, showing it's size, strength and cohesiveness

can be seen as a part of the symbolic struggle to produce and impose the legitimate vision of the world (Bourdieu 1989).

Despite the extraordinary quality of the event, the day passed without clamour. The interaction with the police was unproblematic for the majority of the participants. Does this mean that the Kurds are increasingly free to express their otherness, their non-Turkish identity? I would argue that this is only half the truth. As described, it was Turkish police who guarded the gates, and it was Turkish police who decided who to let in and who to keep out. Also, it was up to them whether or not the celebrations could proceed as planned, their massive presence both by the gates and in the air sent a clear message about who was in charge. The Turkish state, represented by police by the gates and in the air above, decided the limits of the event, in both space and time. The display of Kurdish identity and community was strictly at the mercy of the Turkish state.

The flag incident

According to Turkish and international media coverage, the Newroz celebration had been non-violent and largely unproblematic all over Turkey, except for in one place: In the Mediterranean city of Mersin, three young boys aged 12, 14 and 15, tried to set a Turkish flag on fire during the celebration. They were immediately arrested, according to the daily newspaper *Hürriyet*, along with more than 30 others.

The incident allowed for a manifestation of the power of the Turkish national discourse over that of the Kurds. The Kurds were, on this particular day and in their assigned places, allowed to exist as a group and to articulate their Kurdish identity collectively in public space. But it was the Turkish state that decided whether or not the line of accepted behaviour was crossed. In the case of the three teenagers in Mersin, it definitely was. It is not unique for Turkey to sanction people who dishonour the flag, the symbol of the nation. The particularity is in the reaction, not only from politicians and officials, but from the population at large.

Turkey's military General Staff, often referring to itself as the ultimate guardian of national unity¹¹ (Demirel 2004), condemned the action as "traitorous". Also Kurdish moderate leader Leyla Zana, a politician from the Kurdish political party

¹¹ "Turk Military Condemns Burning of Flag by Kurds":
<http://www.arabnews.com/?page=4§ion=0&article=60883&d=23&m=3&y=2005> (Reading date 13.11.2006)

Dehap who in 1994 was imprisoned for speaking Kurdish at a political rally (Watts 2004), condemned the flag burning and called for respect for the national symbols of Turkey. After calls from the government and the armed forces for the public to show “solidarity” with the defiled national emblem, depicting a white crescent and a star on a red background, the whole city of Istanbul literally turned red: There were huge flags covering entire buildings. There were flags on buses, in shops, in restaurants. According to the news agency AFP, the display of Turkish flags after Newroz 2005 “surpassed even the most patriotic Independence Day displays. Balconies, verandahs, windows, taxis, city buses, banks and businesses here [in Istanbul] and in other major cities – even the vast, labyrinthine covered bazaar in Istanbul – are festooned with the star and crescent emblem.”¹² According to BBC News, trade unions handed out flags, and municipalities organised flag displays.¹³ A columnist in the liberal daily newspaper *Radikal* wrote that “the incident reflects mounting anti Kurdish “racism” in the country, which should be openly discussed if a solution is to be found.”¹⁴ Walking in the streets of Istanbul was truly remarkable and slightly scary. The fervour was such that newspapers began calling for moderation, fearing violence between Kurds and Turks.

A few days later, sitting in the Kurdish cultural centre Mesopotamya Kültür Merkezi (MKM) having tea, we suddenly heard shouting in the street. The MKM is on the first floor of a building on İstiklal Caddesi, the main shopping street in Taksim, a centre for political and social activities in Istanbul. The noise came from a group of Turkish nationalists demonstrating in the streets carrying huge Turkish flags. I asked some of the men in the café what was going on, and they explained that it was a group of nationalists proving their strength as a response to the attempted flag burning in Mersin. Normally, when there are demonstrations in İstiklal Caddesi, there are busloads of armed police present. Both during the demonstration on Women’s Day and peace marches earlier the same month, the police had mobilised massively, at one occasion even bringing in armoured tanks. When I asked why there was no police present on this occasion, the men in the café simply shrugged and said: “That’s just how it is”.

¹² “Botched flag burning leads to patriotic backlash in Turkey.” *Agence France-Presse*, 24 March 2005, quoted from <http://www.kurd.org/newsletters/20050325091940.html> (Reading date 13.11.2006)

¹³ “Flag-waving frenzy grips Turkey.” *BBC News*, 24 March 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4379675.stm> (Reading date 13.11.2006)

¹⁴ “Botched flag burning leads to patriotic backlash in Turkey.” *Agence France-Presse*, 24 March 2005, quoted from <http://www.kurd.org/newsletters/20050325091940.html> (Reading date: 13.11.2006)

This should not be interpreted to mean that the reactions came only from nationalist right-wing groups. A Turkish informant of mine told me that he came home from work to find his wife had draped two Turkish flags from the living room windows. His only comment to me about it was “we are educated people, we shouldn’t be doing this”. He did not, however, confront his wife or remove the flags.

This was the only time I saw a public, openly displayed match of power between the two groups. The situation has several implications: The fact that three boys, no more than children, could upset an entire nation by their actions, implies something about the level of tension of the Kurdish question in Turkey. The massive display of the Turkish flag made clear that any display of Kurdish symbols can easily be overdone by the Turkish response. And while the flag-burners were young boys, the response came from the Turkish government, the army, through television and on government buildings.

The Kurdish experience

The historical and political context outlined in this chapter is necessary in order to understand the context in which I conducted my fieldwork, and to be able to investigate how the Kurds in Istanbul are affected by the conflict between the Kurdish majority and the Turkish state in their everyday lives. Atatürk’s project of creating a Turkish nation-state is far from accomplished. As displayed at the Newroz-celebration, the almost century long oppression of Kurdish identity has not succeeded in creating Turks out of the country’s Kurds, and the current process of reform in order to access the EU creates new possibilities for the Kurds in Turkey to display their ethnic identity.

The asymmetric power relation between the Turkish state and the Kurdish minority is visible in the celebration of Newroz, and in the following display of the majority’s power by use of the Turkish flag. The historical process of nation-building since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey and the armed insurgence by the Kurds has rendered the relationship between the Turkish majority and the country’s largest ethnic minority, the Kurds, hostile. From here the focus will shift to the everyday lives of Kurds in Istanbul living within this historical and political context.

3

Method

Within the context described above I arrived in Istanbul to conduct my fieldwork from January to August 2005. Choosing a smaller, less complex town or a village would probably have made my task more manageable. But Istanbul had a lot to offer that suited my theoretical aspirations. As mentioned, what kept the large, diverse group of Kurds more or less unified was one of my main questions; in Istanbul, where most of my informants never met, and some never even went to the same parts of town, I got the opportunity to make observations of, and reflect upon, what the glue of their ‘imagined community’ consisted of (Anderson 1983). Ethnic identity is often more clearly articulated when it is constantly in close contact with people who are not part of the same ethnic community (Barth 1969). In that respect, Istanbul gave many opportunities of observing ways of handling an ethnic identity with a certain stigma to it (Eidheim 1969).

In this chapter I present my field, my sites and my key informants, and address some of the challenges that arise from doing anthropological fieldwork in a big city. As a final point, I discuss ethical implications of my choice of field and informants.

The city and my locations

Istanbul is a complex city in all senses of the term, literally bridging the gap between Europe and Asia; the Bosphorus Strait dividing the city also marks the border between these two continents. With a population that according to the 2000 census exceeds ten

million, the city has a lot to offer. There are many centres and suburbs, and the different parts of the city may seem like different worlds; from the posh Nişantaşı, through the picturesque Arnavutköy, the cosmopolitan Taksim, the religious Üsküdar, the tourist-trap of Sultanahmet with its astonishing mosques and bazaars, all the way to the shantytown areas scattered around the city.

There is a large Kurdish minority in the city, and several other smaller ethnic and religious groups are present as living proofs of the city's cosmopolitan past as capital of great empires, most recently the Ottoman, who boasted of comprising no less than 72 nationalities (Benhabib and Isiksel 2006).

According to the Profile of Internal Displacement in Turkey, the estimated numbers of people displaced during the 1990s range from 370.000 to two million, as villagers in the South-East, when interviewed by Human Rights Watch, gave much higher figures of people displaced than what was indicated in the figures provided by the Turkish government.¹⁵ Some of these migrants have settled in Istanbul, while many other Kurds moved to Istanbul for other reasons, eg. attending university or finding a job.

Though there is great diversity across the different parts of Istanbul, they blend into each other, and it is difficult to identify areas of Kurdish dominance. The Kurds in Istanbul are not a homogeneous, unified group, and economic status is one of the differentiating factors. Thus, Kurds don't necessarily live in Kurdish areas; like most people they live where they can afford. My informants, when reflecting upon where to live, emphasised closeness to relatives or work place, or the economic factor of how much rent they were able to pay.

Still, there are some tendencies towards clustering, and many of my informants told me that their families on arrival in Istanbul had settled close to someone they knew, either relatives or people originating from the same town, and these compatriots made up the main basis of social network for some of my informants. The Göç Der¹⁶ report from 2002 shows that having relatives and kin, having acquaintances from their homeland, proximity to the homeland and the hope to find a job were the

¹⁵ See the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre country report on Turkey here: [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/\(httpCountries\)/C1E13DEC3D6630EB802570A7004CB2F8?opendocument&count=10000](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpCountries)/C1E13DEC3D6630EB802570A7004CB2F8?opendocument&count=10000)

¹⁶ An NGO working to improve the living conditions of the internally displaced Kurds in Turkey, see: <http://www.gocder.com/>

four most important factors when the migrants from the South-Eastern regions chose where to settle down.

Multi-sited fieldwork in an urban setting

Conducting field work in a big city demands alternative perspectives on the traditional anthropological methodology. Urban anthropology is a young discipline, emerging in the 1960's as a self-labelled body of research (Sanjek 1990) and gaining in importance and substance in the 1970s (Sanjek 1990, Hannerz 1980). The reactions to the move of anthropologists from their traditional small-scale sites into the cities varied:

To some, the theoretical and methodological resources of the anthropological tradition seem insufficient for urban research; for other, the problem is precisely that the new urbanologists are not paying sufficient heed to the ideas developed by anthropologists in other social contexts.

Hannerz (1980:2).

Until 1980 the urban anthropology was dominated by works focusing on topics like exposure of urban poverty, documentation of rural-urban migration, concepts of “the urban village” and a fascination with ethnicity. However, the concern with poor and urban migrants was not coupled with studies of established working and middle classes, the rich or the policy makers. Life-cycle, women, gender and sexuality were all understudied (Sanjek 1990).

My focus on the lives of Kurds living in Istanbul is also based on what Sanjek refers to as a ‘fascination with ethnicity’ (Sanjek 1990:152). Still, I have made efforts to get access to data that includes the aspects of life-cycle, gender, economic status and level of education.

My fieldwork was multi-sited within the urban context of Istanbul, with the challenges such an approach poses of making connections between sites through “translating and tracings among distinctive discourses from site to site” (Marcus 1995).

The different sites of my fieldwork were not connected by my informants being part of a network, most of them never met. My sites are rather connected by the fact that all my informants identify themselves as Kurds, and live their lives in the Turkish dominated city of Istanbul. They are all young, and none of them are married. As the

presentation below shows, their lives in Istanbul are different on many levels. My key informants are six young women and one young man. They are the ones who gave me access to the different sites, and it is through them I was introduced to their families and friends.

Key informants and sites

Being in a big city made locating my informants more difficult, and initially I had to legitimise my presence at all the meetings and debates I went to. Although the Middle Eastern concept of hospitality is present in Istanbul, it doesn't necessarily mean that people invite you to hang out with them all day.

In order to make sure not to end up with informants from only one part of the Kurdish population, I chose to live in Taksim, a diverse part of town which is considered a centre for political and social activities of all kinds. From there, I went to different parts of town to visit organizations, families, universities, a Kurdish newspaper, and the *Mesopotamiya Kültür Merkezi*, a Kurdish cultural centre.

Most of my informants lived in the outskirts of the city, and staying in one of these outskirts would mean hours on public transportation to get to my other locations. Some of my informants were looking for new accommodation, and had no room for a cohabitant. The only ones who invited me to share their house were the least resourceful people in the shantytown areas. Accepting their offer would, however, have excluded me from other arenas that were important to me. Staying with the poor migrants would have given me a deeper insight in their lives, but I was determined not to focus on one marginalised group of Kurds.

Arriving in Istanbul, I started looking for informants by visiting women's organizations and the Kurdish cultural centre *Mesopotamiya Kültür Merkezi*. Before my departure I had e-mailed academics from all over the world who had written about Kurds in Turkey, and as a result I had some phone numbers and e-mail addresses to Kurdish women, either personal friends of these academics, academics in Turkish universities or people working in organizations. I got to know a woman working in the Kurdish newspaper, and after some time I also got in touch with Kurdish students at one of the universities. Visiting an NGO offering work training for young, unemployed migrants, I got in touch with young women from families arriving in Istanbul after migrating from the South-Eastern areas. As a result, my informants are

Kurds with different backgrounds, strategically selected from my informal network and through NGOs.

I also have some Turkish informants, mostly friends from earlier visits, and a Turkish language teacher. This helped me contextualise the observations made with my Kurdish informants, through my Turkish informants' thoughts about and attitudes towards the Kurdish question.

In the following, section I present some of my most important informants, the places where we met and spent time together, as well as their families and friends who also became my informants. The names are fictional, as some of them otherwise would be easy to identify.

Ayşe and her family in the *gecekondu*

The NGO offering work training had just started a course when I started visiting them. Most of the participants in the program were Kurdish girls 18 to 25 years old. The NGO was located in the Asian part of the city, across the Bosphorus and a one-hour busride from most of my other sites. There are small, local shops and some cafés, but mostly there are wide, dusty roads and apartment-buildings. The contrast is sharp to the vivid, crowded and always active Taksim.

After a couple of weeks of regular visits to the NGO, some of the girls invited me to their homes. I chose to go with three of them; Ayşe, Devrim and Zeyneb. I kept visiting the organization and Ayşe's family on a regular basis until the end of my stay, the families of Zeyneb and Devrim only on occasion.

Ayşe is twenty and unmarried, originally from a village outside Mardin in the Kurdish-dominated region of South-Eastern Turkey. In the NGO she learns to use a sewing machine and how to read and write, hoping to find a job in the clothing industry.

Ayşe and her family had migrated from place to place all through Turkey, and ended up in Istanbul three years earlier. They were the poorest of all my informants; only one of the men in an extended family of thirteen had a steady job. They live in a *gecekondu*, a shantytown, literally 'built over night'. The area they live in used to be mostly Kurdish, until construction companies started to buy lots to build high-rise buildings. During the course of my fieldwork, the area was transformed: While at first dominated by shabby, one-floor *gecekondu*-buildings, the high-rise buildings slowly started taking over, with huge signs boasting that whoever bought apartments would

have a life in “quality and safety”, with a walled garden with a swimming pool for each building. Vis-à-vis one of these commercial signs, Ayşe, her mother, her two older brothers, her brothers’ wives and their seven children shared three rooms. Theirs is not a life in safety *or* quality: they don’t own the land they live on, and they are always prepared for someone to claim the land, leaving them homeless.

Ayşe and her family welcomed me into their home, and shared their food and thoughts. They were as curious about me as I was about them, and our evenings on pillows on the floor were educational both ways. Her older brothers and particularly her mother spent long evenings with me, and the children taught me a mix of Turkish and Kurmanji vocabulary. Being in a household of three generations and three nuclear families taught me something about life and rules in the private sphere.

For the first couple of months, they had no electricity, they had been caught stealing power from a cable running past their house, and didn’t have money to pay the bill. There was one tap of water in the combined kitchen and bathroom, illegally tapping a passing water-pipe. During the day, the mattresses and pillows used as beds were stacked up against the walls, only a couple left on the floor as chairs. All meals were eaten on the floor, a table cloth was spread out and bowls of rice, yoghurt, beans, filled vine-leaves or aubMehmetes, and on rare occasions chicken, were shared among those present. The two married women prepared the food outside on a fireplace. Normally, the two men, their mother and I ate first, Ayşe joined us half way through the meal, while the two married women and their children ate after their husbands had finished. Still, this was no strict rule, sometimes we all ate together. After the meal, the women served tea before disappearing into the kitchen to clean up, and then got the children ready for bed. The men and their mother stayed in the largest room drinking tea, smoking cigarettes and discussing the prices of vegetables and from which region it was better to buy which vegetables this season. In the evening, the mattresses were spread out on the floor, one nuclear family in each of the two biggest rooms, and Ayşe sharing the small room with her mother.

The NGO-course finished about half-way through my fieldwork, and with it Ayşes life outside the household. Only when I visited was she allowed more than a quick trip out to buy bread, cheese, olives or yoghurt. We went for walks in the neighbourhood, and discussed what it was like to be a young girl, comparing our lives.

Some of their relatives live near by, and through Ayşe's family I was introduced to an arena of poor Kurds in one of Istanbul's city slums.

Zeyneb and Devrim in the NGO

Through the NGO I also met Zeyneb and Devrim, who went to the work training course offered by the NGO to become clothes designers. Zeyneb is Devrim's maternal aunt, but there are only a few years between them – Zeyneb is 21, Devrim 18. They grew up in a village in Siirt, speaking Kurmanji, one of the Kurdish languages, at home, and Arabic in the streets.¹⁷ Their first real meeting with the Turkish language was their three years of primary school. We spent time together in the premises of the organization, both during the course and after hours. On Fridays, some of the people attending the course, among them Zeyneb and Devrim, stayed to practice Kurdish folklore: songs and dances. I joined them for the dancing part, learning how to hold my neighbouring dancers' little fingers and following the lead.

I also visited their homes and families, they too live on the Asian side, another half hour into the Anatolian peninsula. Zeyneb and her family live in a house with separate floors for each married couple. The house is old and worn-out, and Zeyneb's brothers work hard to manage the mortgage downpayments.

Zeyneb is unmarried and lives on the ground floor with her parents. Her younger, unmarried brother usually lives with them, but at the time of my fieldwork, he was doing his military service. Her married brothers occupy the rest of the building with their families. They are all married to younger girls who arrived in Istanbul from their village close to the Iranian border for the wedding, and stayed on with their husbands' families. Her married sisters live with their husbands; some are in the same part of town, others in other parts of Istanbul, while others again live in different areas of Turkey. They are thirteen siblings in total.

Zeyneb and Devrim have gone to primary school, but have no further education. Zeyneb has worked in the textile industry earlier. Zeyneb's brothers all sell vegetables for a living, as do Devrim's father and those of her brothers who are old enough to work. Their mothers are at home, same as the wives of their brothers. Zeyneb and Devrim live in the same part of Istanbul, as do other branches of the extended family. The family constitute an important network for them. All the women are veiled, and

¹⁷ In Eastern Turkey about two percent of the population have Arabic as their mother tongue (Smits and Gündüz-Hoşgör 2003:835).

wear long sleeved blouses and long skirts. Zeyneb and Devrim are the only women who, through the course in the NGO, had individual projects outside the private sphere.

Gülhan and Özlem going to cafés in Taksim

I got to know two young women working in a Turkish language Kurdish newspaper. They were patient as I tried to use the new Turkish grammar I learnt, and one of them knew some English words which eased the communication.

We never spoke much about their work in the newspaper, we simply hung out and went to cafés, to the cinema, to the Kurdish Culture Centre, to a Kurdish theatre, and shopping in İstiklal Caddesi. They let me know when there was a protest: we went to marches on women's day, to protest a huge dam-project in South-Eastern Anatolia, and to a couple of peace marches together. They are both from Tunceli, a region in the eastern part of Turkey. Their only language is Turkish, but they wish to learn Zaza, the version of Kurdish spoken by their older relatives. They are both unmarried, one is 29, the other 27, and live with their families. Gülhan was looking for new accommodation closer to the newspaper offices, as she had almost two hours travel from her family's home to the office. However, during the seven months I was there, she wasn't able to find anything she could afford.

Aynur considering the big questions in life

Aynur and I met in the crowd during the Newroz celebration in Zeytinburnu. She was there with her family, and me being one of very few foreigners in the crowd, she asked me what I was doing there. We decided to meet at a less crowded place, and we started meeting in cafés or going for walks in the streets of Taksim. She attends high-school, and wishes to be accepted into the textile department in one of Turkey's most prestigious universities. Most of the time we spoke about her plans for the future, and the obstacles that she encountered in her everyday life. She also shared her reflections on what was decent behaviour for a young Kurdish girl in the city, and her fears of being assimilated through her close contact with the Turkish majority.

Her father used to be a politician for the Kurdish political party DEHAP. He now works night shifts in a factory, while Aynur's mother has a job doing the dishes in a near-by restaurant. Aynur lives with her parents and her sister in an apartment in a suburb in the European part of Istanbul.

Mehmet and the Kurdish students

Mehmet is 22 years old, and studies at the university to become an English teacher. His family lives in a small village close to the Iranian border, and he moved to Istanbul alone to go to university. His parents have some farmland, his mother is a housewife while his father and brother partly work on their own land and the land of bigger landowners in the area.

We met at a Kurdish language center in Aksaray, where he attended a course to improve his Kurdish. Mehmet introduced me to a group of students at his university who edit a periodical on Kurdish language. He considers Kurmanji his mother tongue; he was raised in a Kurmanji-speaking family, and was not fluent in Turkish before the age of six, when he started primary school. Although his Turkish is very good, he told me that he feels much more confident using Kurmanji, and that he sometimes forgets Turkish words or mix them up with Kurmanji ones.

We mostly met at the university campus or at cafés in Taksim, exchanging literature on the Kurdish question and Kurdish culture, drinking tea and discussing issues of language.

Internet

Before my departure I discovered several web pages distributing news from the Kurdish areas, and read these both before and during my fieldwork. These web pages presented news that I was unable to find in the Turkish media on the Internet. I include these web pages as a part of my field, as they were my main source of information about what was going on in the Kurdish region during my fieldwork, and also reported statements from PKK-leader Abdullah Öcalan and Dehap, the Kurdish political party.

These web pages often offer alternative explanations to incidents in the Kurdish regions, not presented in mainstream Turkish media, for instance in the case of the flag incident described above: The version of the story posted on a page called Kurdishinfo.com, a webpage posting news from several other Kurdish web-pages, included an element that later spread to several similar sites on the web, and which I heard from some of my informants. According to [Kurdishinfo](http://Kurdishinfo.com), it was a Turkish nationalist who had given the flag to the three boys, telling them to burn it. People in

the crowd had seen a man leaving the place doing a sign supposedly belonging to the Grey Wolves, the youth organization of the Turkish Nationalist Movement Party.

Deciding which version is true is not my intention when relating this alternative version of the story. What is important to notice is that there is a struggle for the right to define what is actually going on, and besides the Kurdish newspaper written in Turkish that constantly fights attempts by the government to close it down, Kurds use the internet to spread their versions of what's going on, both in Turkey and in the Kurdish areas in Iran, Iraq and Syria. The possibility of communicating across distance and borders offered by the Internet has consequences for the flow of information, and makes the states' control mechanisms less efficient. Many of the Kurdish websites are based outside Turkey, and this makes it difficult for the Turkish government to control them.¹⁸

While these are new arenas for debate and spreading information, the access is not equally distributed. Though internet cafes are found in bigger cities all over Turkey, not everyone can afford it, and far from all are literate.

Language

The language situation in my various sites differs. I arrived in Istanbul with less than adequate language skills; I knew some everyday survival Turkish, like how to ask for bread and cheese at the grocers, but I was not familiar with any of the Kurdish languages. During the first three months, learning the language was my top priority, in addition to mapping the field and searching for arenas for my fieldwork.

The languages known by my informants were (1) Turkish, (2) Kurmanji, (3) English and (4) Zaza. Kurmanji and Zaza are the two of the five Kurdish languages that are spoken by the Kurds in Turkey. Kurmanji is the most commonly known, while Zaza is spoken by a minority of the Kurds. Whether my informants knew English, depended on level of education: Mehmet and his student friends spoke excellent English, Aynur knew English quite well, and Gülhan knew some words and sentences. Zeyneb and Devrim knew Kurmanji and Turkish, so all communication with them was in Turkish. They speak Kurmanji at home, but have no difficulties switching between Kurmanji and Turkish. Ayşe and her relatives all use Kurmanji as

¹⁸ Still, the Turkish government recently made attempts to close down the Kurdish TV-channel Roj-TV, which is based in Denmark, and an Internet based Kurdish newspaper located in Germany was closed down this winter, on accusations that it was pro-terrorist.

everyday language. The men mainly speak Turkish when they are out working, while the women only speak Turkish when going to the market. Some of the older women don't speak Turkish, or speak only very little. I spoke and was addressed in Turkish, but they let me know that they wouldn't have spoken Turkish if I weren't there. The youngest children knew only Kurmanji, while the older ones switched easily between the two. Gülhan and Özlem knew only Turkish: their parents speak Zaza, but never taught it to their children.

The reasons for knowing or not knowing a Kurdish language are at the same time stories of the different kinds and levels of violations of cultural and linguistic rights they and their families have encountered, and the situation of the Kurdish languages and my informants' ways of relating to them will be addressed in chapter five. Here, it is necessary to note that the language situation was a big challenge throughout my fieldwork in most of my sites. The solution was intensive language training and continuous private lessons in the home of a Turkish woman.

Why choose Turkish when my informants are Kurdish? At least three reasons derive from my description of the language situation in the different sites: (1) Not all Kurds speak a Kurdish language. (2) Those who do speak a Kurdish language are divided between Kurmanji and Zaza, and learning both would not be possible for me. (3) Knowing Turkish was important for everyday life in Istanbul.

My difficulties concerning language made me aware of how disempowering it makes you feel, not being confident in the language of the place you live. Through observations and conversations, and through my own experiences struggling with the Turkish grammar, I realised the importance of language when it comes to social life, and the ability to find your way and participate in society.

I observed how my informants use Kurdish language, both in speaking a Kurdish language and in speaking *of* Kurdish languages so as to express Kurdish identity and resist what they interpreted as a politics of assimilation from the Turkish government.

Intersectional methodology

The Kurds have no doubt suffered hardships in the explicitly mono-lingual, mono-national Republic of Turkey (Benhabib and Isiksel 2006). Still, by employing an intersectional perspective, I also include the *other* social divisions and power grids that are at work in the everyday life of my informants: They are all Kurdish, but simultaneously, they are women, men, young, old, literate and illiterate – and the list

goes on. One of the criticisms of intersectional theory is that the list of possible social divisions is potentially endless (Ludvig 2006); which differences are made relevant and which are not depends on the context. My multi-sited field and by “being there ... and there ... and there” (Hannerz 2003), rendered visible how different the lives of individual Kurds in Istanbul are, and how the oppression of cultural and linguistic rights is experienced by differently situated Kurds: By meeting informants from various backgrounds and different living conditions, I got to observe some of the ways in which my informants’ understanding of their Kurdish identity was influenced by other social positionings like gender, age, linguistic skills, economic factors, level of education or a reliable network.

Ethical implications

Entering my field implied entering into the conflict between the Turks and the Kurds. As Khasanov (1996) notes, the field of research had more than academic interest to those who were to become my informants. In the theoretical introduction, I argue for not labelling the Kurds either an ethnic group or a nation, as this has political implications concerning the validity of their claims, be it for cultural and linguistic rights, or for a free Kurdish state, or anything in between. Still, at least in a Turkish context, there was nothing neutral or “un-political” about coming to Istanbul displaying an interest in the situation of the Kurds in the city.

I was surprisingly easily accepted into the arenas I tried to enter. The Kurdish newspaper is constantly under threat by the government of being shut down, still I entered and left as I pleased, handing in my identification card as their only insurance – a routine that is employed in most such office buildings in Turkey. During lunch on the top floor, various employees told me things about their past that would have compromised them gravely if I were to report it to Turkish officials.

In the household of Ayşe and her relatives, I was also accepted and welcome to come and go as I pleased. They told me of their relatives in the guerrilla, and some of the men even told me they would have joined the guerrilla weren’t it for their families. Both the employees of the Kurdish newspaper and the relatives of Ayşe are already exposed, and giving me information might have aggravated their situation.

My informants in the newspaper often, when talking to me, referred to “leftist people from Europe” who had come to “improve the situation of the Kurds”. My interpretation is that they thought giving me information would help them spread

information about the situation of the Kurds in Turkey: they saw me as an ally, someone there to help them. The same goes for the relatives of Ayşe, their confidence in me was based on a belief that I was there as an ally, and that I had some special interest in the Kurds as a people: I was categorised with people from NGOs and political parties, coming to Turkey to document oppression and put pressure on the Turkish government, and spreading the word on my return to Norway. I explained my project honestly each time I introduced myself, avoiding the temptation to win the trust of my informants by pretending to be a campaigner for their views (Khazanov 1996).

Choosing to get to know the situation of the Kurds in Istanbul was, of course, not a choice made at random: I support the claim of minorities in Turkey to be granted their cultural and linguistic rights, if not all the ways in which differently situated Kurds go about claiming these rights. Khazanov (1996) argues that the very nature of ethnic conflicts makes it impossible to form categorical judgements about who is in the right: “In one respect or another, all guys are bad; it just so happens that some bad guys are stronger than others” (Khazanov 1996:6). Still, this dissertation is probably far from what my informants envisioned when they let me share their time, their thoughts and their homes. Had they been able to read it, as only a couple of them are, they would probably be disappointed.

The fact that most of my key informants are young women, like me, poses another challenge. The relationship between researcher and informant is often an assymetric relationship when it comes to power, with one party gathering information while the other party providing information (Kirsch 2005:2165). Spending time with these young women over time, going to cafés and staying in their homes with their families, makes it necessary to be aware of the difference between ‘friendship’ and ‘friendliness’ (Kirsch 2005:2164), in order to make sure that both I as a researcher and my informants have a realistic understanding of our relationship.

I have done my best to be as fair and honest with my informants as possible, In return, they have shared their time and thoughts with me, based on which I now move on to describe how their Kurdish identity is handled in interaction with the Turkish majority in Istanbul.

4

Avoiding stigma, creating places

The Third International Conference on EU Turkey and the Kurds was held in October 2006. In its concluding remarks, the Conference “calls upon all governments, to urge Turkey and other Member States of the EU to help foster a climate of peace so that a democratic platform for dialogue can be established between Turks, Kurds, and other constituent peoples and minorities who are resident in Turkey”.¹⁹ This climate of dialogue was rare in Istanbul: most of the Turks I spoke to knew little of the Kurds, even the ones sharing their own city. They spoke of the Kurds as if they existed only in the South-Eastern region, and most often in terms of the separatist discourse that has been abandoned even by its inventor Abdullah Öcalan.

In this chapter, I present four examples of how my informants by concealing their kurdishness while interacting with Turks, avoid the potential stigma of their Kurdish identity in the Turkish dominated city of Istanbul. Istanbul is a large city with a diverse population. This, of course, does not mean that people from different social strata or different ethnic backgrounds necessarily interact directly: While big cities function as meeting places, they are at the same time places where it is easier to disappear than in smaller towns and villages.

I will present (1) Gülhan and Özlem, (2) Mehmet, (3) Ayşe, and (4) Can and Burat in situations that are part of their daily lives as I know them, and analyse these as

¹⁹ For the concluding remarks of the conference, see:
<http://www.eutcc.org/articles/1/17/document266.ehtml> (Reading date 26.10.2006).

strategies of avoiding social stigma and creating rooms for their Kurdish identity. According to the political and historical context described in chapter two, I argue that Kurdish ethnic identity is connected with a certain stigma when encountered by members of the Turkish majority. This does not imply that all Kurds or all Turks experience it this way, but that this fits as a general description. Although the tense relationship between Kurds and Turks doesn't imply that all Turks are hostile towards the Kurdish minority, it is not always easy for Kurds to identify in which situations it is acceptable to be open about one's Kurdish identity. The possibilities and challenges posed by big city life are met by my informants in different ways.

Presenting these examples, I use the insights from Eidheim (1969), who asks how ethnic diversity is socially articulated and maintained. His answer is that in order to analyse the social organization of ethnic borders, we need a *relational* frame of reference – a frame of reference that includes meeting across borders. Eidheim sees ethnic groups as social categories, providing a basis for status ascription, and observes this in the everyday lives of his informants in an area of mixed Norwegian–Coast Lappish population residing by the fjords and inlets of West Finnmark, Norway:

My material shows a situation where an ethnic status (or identity) is, in a sense, illegitimate, and therefore not acted out in institutional inter-ethnic behaviour. Nevertheless, this very illegitimacy has definite implications in the process of role-taking in elementary interaction and thus adds form to inter-ethnic relations.

Eidheim 1969:39-40

Eidheim's insights from West Finnmark are valuable for understanding aspects of the daily life of Kurds in Istanbul, as the Kurdish identity also, in a sense, is illegitimate. Despite the different contexts of these inter-ethnic relations, many of the same "processes of role-taking in elementary interaction" that Eidheim describes can be observed in Istanbul as well. The language of symbols, marking individuals belonging to one group or the other, is subtle and complex, and must be understood within the local social context (Eidheim 1969). As is the case among the Kurds in Istanbul, Eidheim describes physical appearance as an unreliable criteria for classification. And in Western Finnmark, where the Lapps are a numeric minority, the visible signs of Lappishness – like Lappish costume and dress – are almost absent.

Eidheim operates with three 'spheres': (1) a public sphere including the "common encounters in the routines of everyday life", (2) a Lappish closed sphere that includes

kin and family as well as non-kin who are known to be Lappish, and (3) a Norwegian closed sphere where Norwegians voice their views on the Lapps. The closed Lappish sphere may be established in public arenas, but as soon as Norwegians come within earshot, the situation is redefined into a public sphere through change of language or change of topic. In the following, I will see how Eidheim's insights shed light on my own observations of my Kurdish informants in Istanbul.

"That café is Kurdish"

Özlem and Gülhan live in different parts of town, but they work in the building of the Kurdish newspaper in Taksim. Taksim is an area of Istanbul with lots of activities of all kinds: İstiklal Caddesi, the main street, is crowded and lined with clothes shops, restaurants and cafés. In between, on the upper floors of the buildings of İstiklal and the surrounding streets, are the offices of numerous non-governmental organizations and political parties. We met two or three times a week, either in the newspaper's building or in cafés. Both Gülhan and Özlem are unmarried girls in their twenties, they wear jeans and t-shirts or blouses, and Gülhan's hair is short and modern. Özlem's long hair gets attention from the hair-dresser every Friday, particularly if her boyfriend is coming to town. They both live with their families, but spend most of their waking hours at work, working for almost no salary in the newspapers administration.

The newspaper's building is in Eidheim's terms a 'Kurdish closed sphere' (Eidheim 1969:46), a clearly defined Kurdish area: it is a newspaper writing about the situation for the Kurds in Turkey, and to my knowledge all the people who work there are Kurds. It is the only work-place I have been to where having been imprisoned is brought up at lunch as something positive about the employee, as the sentences in most cases have been for political work or use of a Kurdish language in public places.

After visiting Gülhan and Özlem in the newspaper over a couple of weeks, to have tea or lunch in the canteen, we started going to cafés from time to time, and sometimes to a local diner down the street from their office. There are so many cafés in the area that I at first didn't notice any pattern, but after a while I realised that all the places we went to were either owned or run by Kurds, and that my two friends knew someone working in every café we visited. Either I heard them talk about the newspaper or a Kurdish theatre or organization, or I was introduced to their acquaintance and told that he or she was Kurdish. As the number of my Kurdish

acquaintances grew during my fieldwork, going to a café with Gülhan and Özlem more and more often included coincidentally meeting other Kurds I knew, who also chose the same cafés.

Going to cafés in the same area with Turkish friends, I never once went to the same cafés as when I went out with Gülhan and Özlem or other Kurdish friends. The cafés might be next door to each other or even in separate floors of the same building, but my Kurdish and my Turkish friends consistently never went to the same cafés.

Normally, it was Gülhan and Özlem who decided where to go, but one evening when Gülhan called, I had plans with other friends. She first said she wouldn't come, but after telling her where I was going, and that I was going with other foreign friends, not Turks, she joined in anyway. "That café is Kurdish, a friend of mine works there", she said.

It is by no means extraordinary to prefer your friend's café over the one of a stranger. Still, the ethnic dimension of the choices my two informants made, offers a partial explanation to the fact that there is so little interaction between Turks and Kurds, even in a crowded place like Taksim: the Kurds in the area establish some of the cafés as 'Kurdish closed spheres': by choosing the places they know, they manage to single out safe locations in an area where one would expect a larger degree of interaction between Kurds and Turks. By this manoeuvring they avoid the potentially unpleasant confrontations that going to an unfamiliar place might bring. The young Kurds and Turks of Taksim share the streets and even the buildings, but the many cafés are only frequented by Kurds, thus constituting Kurdish closed spheres within the Turkish dominated city. Only in these locations were topics like protests, news from the Kurdish areas or discussions about Kurdish language brought up, along with the regular chit-chat of café visits.

"This is not an appropriate place"

Mehmet is a student at an Istanbul university. He works hard to do well in his studies to become a teacher, and works on the Kurdish periodical he and a group of students publish. We used to meet in a tea-garden outside the university campus, at one of the green lawns between the beautiful old campus buildings, or at arrangements in the university concert hall. He knew many of the other students there, and while wandering around the campus area we often bumped into some of his friends.

Mehmet often introduced his friends by saying that they worked with him in the periodical, or that they went to the same Kurmanji-course in another part of town. When speaking to his friends there were often references to something that had happened in the Kurdish region, some new literature on language or discussions about the work being done in the language course or in the Kurdish Language Institute. Towards those who didn't speak a Kurdish language he often made teasing remarks that they had to work harder to learn. His Kurdish identity was openly displayed, but I soon discovered how he always observed who was around:

Once we met in the tea garden it was quite crowded. We had both brought books that we thought the other might want to read, on the situation of the Kurds. There were essays on Kurdish nationalism, books on Kurdish history, historical accounts of the Kurds in Turkey and other telling titles. I picked up a couple of books from my bag, and put them on the table starting to explain what they were about. Mehmet looked at me and told me to put them away immediately. "This is not an appropriate place", he said. After finishing our tea, we went to the copy-shop to make photocopies of each other's books. Mehmet went straight to one of the guys working there, greeting him – it turned out they knew each other. Taking the books out, Mehmet told his friend what we wanted. Hearing a 'pling' as the door went up and other customers entered, he put the books back into the bag, and we left. "They wouldn't have liked it. They're nationalist", he said, referring to the newcomers. The Kurdish closed sphere that had been established was interrupted by the newcomers' entrance.

Through paying close attention to his surroundings, Mehmet switches between a closed Kurdish sphere and a public sphere; In the latter, topics and visual signs – like the books on Kurdish nationalism – are not displayed. However, through his academic studies, he inserts Kurdish elements into the public sphere: During lessons in Turkish or English language, he sometimes raises his hand to ask if this or that grammatical form in Kurmanji resembles what the teacher is talking about. When there are debates on the class' e-mail list, he sometimes posts academic articles on Kurdish language. "I always do it very carefully, so that I don't upset anyone," he explained to me.

His way of handling the transitions between safe and unsafe, Kurdish and public contexts, was quite impressive, and I felt insensitive to the consequences it might have for him to display his ethnic identities in the wrong context.

“I’m too lazy”

The last example is from Ayşe’s life, the young girl from the *gecekondu*. Half way through my fieldwork, the course she attended at the NGO ended. After that, she mostly stayed at home.

All day she stayed at home with her mother and her brothers’ wives, looking after the children, mending clothes, cleaning the house, or just sitting there doing nothing. She sometimes went out to get tea, rice, cheese or bread, but was expected to return home immediately. Also, she sometimes went with her mother to visit relatives living in the neighbourhood, but except from the change of company, there was little else being done at their relatives house but sitting, chewing seeds, drinking tea and gossiping with the women of the household and the neighbouring houses. The men were out working, and the women spent their time on the patio outside the entrance door, surrounded by a garden that separated them from the people passing on the small road passing by the house. The young children came and went, playing in the garden or in the streets, while the older came home when the school day was over, and the men returned in the evening after selling vegetables and fruit from their lorries all day.

At several occasions, Ayşe told me she was bored to death, she was sick of having her brothers’ noisy children screaming and running all over, and she was tired of not doing anything. She felt pacified, but her attempts of getting out of the house proved to be temporary. Ever since she was a child, she had helped out because her family was poor, travelling around and harvesting whatever was ripe and would give some extra money. She has had jobs while in Istanbul, one making tea at a *dershane*, a place where pupils and students go for extra tutoring, and one in the clothing industry. In all the jobs she has had, her salary went to her older brothers. Sometimes she was allowed to keep a few *liras* for herself, but her mother didn’t allow her to buy a cell-phone for the little she had left – which wouldn’t have been enough for a cell-phone anyway – although that was what she really wanted. A phone of her own would have given her the opportunity to maintain contact with her elder sisters in other parts of the country, or maybe even to get some friends in their Istanbul neighbourhood, she thought. In addition, the work itself hadn’t been very rewarding to her, and she told me that she hadn’t felt comfortable with her co-workers in any of the places.

The situation I describe only fits the last half of our acquaintance. When we first met, she was attending the course in the NGO, meant to prepare young, unemployed migrants in the area for getting a job. There she learned how to use a sewing machine, and how to read and write. She was there for seven hours every day, and each Friday women from other NGOs came to lecture about topics that might be important to the young participants; healthy food, hygiene, women's health, child rearing, controlling one's own economy, violence in close relations, and how to apply for a job.

There were twenty girls and four boys in the program, only one of whom was Turkish. The criteria for being accepted did not mention ethnic origin; The manager told me that if they explicitly favoured Kurdish people, they would probably be closed down. However, the demographics of the area was such that being a poor, unemployed migrant usually coincided with being Kurdish, and the participants and those working there both considered it a safe place to display Kurdish identity.

About a week after the course had ended, I went with Ayşe back to the NGO for a "power-chat" with the chair-woman. She told Ayşe that this was her big chance of getting out of the house, of gaining control over her own life. "Keep some of the money you earn for yourself" she said repeatedly, in between urging Ayşe to seek out places where she would like to work, put on her best clothes and go there to ask for a job. "Don't just go home and stay there!" the chair-woman shouted after us as we were leaving. On the way back home, Ayşe shrugged and said: "I'm too lazy to work".

During the following months, she made no effort to find a job, always saying that she would try next week, or that her brother would buy her a sewing machine so that she could make clothes at home and sell at the market. He never did, and judging by their problems paying for water and electricity, I doubt it was ever a realistic option.

"I'm too lazy to work," she repeated. But both her own evaluations of her daily life and her general response to life outside the household indicate that there was more to it than mere laziness. When outside the household or the NGO premises, she cut off all attempts of contact with people in the streets asking the time or direction. She displayed a general distrust of people outside the few households she regularly visits.

What does this story have to do with managing Kurdish ethnic identity in interaction with the Turkish majority? As I see it, Ayşe's strategy to avoid stigma is staying at home. Instead of creating rooms where her Kurdish identity can be safely displayed, she stays at home in the room already created by her family.

Ayşe was in a sense lucky. Being a young, untrained, illiterate Kurdish woman is not the best résumé for getting a decent job, but what she learnt at the course was more than many others in her situation get a chance to learn. The NGO organizing the courses do it to enable young women to take direction of their own lives, to provide them with some strategies. However, it didn't take long before Ayşe was back on the couch outside the family home all day, only leaving for cheese, rice, bread or olives.

Undercover Kurds

Can²⁰, a young man I met at a social gathering, was of Kurdish ancestry. We were in a crowded room, a table by the wall was filled with bottles of red wine and snacks, and the people in the room were a mix of Turks and foreigners. A friend who knew about my project introduced me to the young man, and after a while, when those around us were occupied in other conversations, I asked him if he was Kurdish. His reply was a complex mix of “yes, no, kind-of, but not anyway” accompanied by a large sip of wine and lighting of a cigarette. He then explained that his parents were Kurdish, but that their ethnic identity hadn't been made relevant through his childhood; he had been raised as a Turk in Istanbul. He knew about his ancestry, but it was never spoken of. He was a Kurd in terms of descent and blood, but had been raised as, and felt like, a Turk. His Kurdish ancestry was a secret he in his daily life shared with a few close friends.

I met another man in a similar situation at my language course; Burat was there to learn English. At first, he didn't mention his Kurdish ancestry. But as he was trying to get a job as a journalist I figured he could probably help me understand some of the complexity of the Turkish society. When I explained that I wanted information about the situation of the Kurds, he told me he was Kurdish himself, but, in order to have a career, he never told anyone. His dream was ambitious: he wanted to become a television talk-show host, something that would probably be even more difficult in the political climate in Turkey today if he was open about his Kurdish lineage. While Can had been raised as a Turk in Istanbul, Burat grew up in a village in the south-eastern region, his family identifying itself as Kurdish. It was after moving to Istanbul to pursue a career that he started concealing his Kurdish ancestry and upbringing.

These two young men both live as Turks, while still letting their knowledge of their Kurdish ancestry affect their self-perception. They both express anxiety for

²⁰ Pronounced *djan*, as in janitor

being unmasked as a Kurd. From their different outsets, they have chosen not to let their Kurdish ancestry be relevant in their lives, largely because it makes their daily lives easier, and it makes fulfilling their personal dreams for the future easier.

Evaluating ethnic identities

These young Kurds in Istanbul all have to relate to the reception their ethnic or national identity may get in interaction with members of the Turkish majority. What these four examples illustrate, is that they have different ways of handling the challenges posed by the potential stigma connected to their Kurdish identity, and they indicate how other factors than ethnicity are crucial for understanding how the lives of individuals are affected by membership in ethnic collectives.

Eidheim interprets his informants' strategies as ways to appear as Norwegian:

Under the disability of a stigmatized ethnic identity, members of the Coast Lappish population in question seek to qualify themselves as full participants in the Norwegian society.

Eidheim 1969:40

In order to obtain membership in the Norwegian society, he argues, the Lapps need to develop the skills of either avoiding or tolerating sanctions from their Norwegian counterpart. Avoiding to display Kurdish identity in public spheres is, as I interpret it, also a way of avoiding stigma. Still, the ways my informants evaluate the Kurdish identity seems to differ. Can and Burat, living their lives as Turks, may fit Eidheim's interpretation in that they consider becoming Turkish their best option. Those of my informants who are openly Kurdish, on the other hand, don't hide their Kurdishness as a result of a wish to be perceived as Turks. They simply wish to avoid stigma while protecting their Kurdish identity from pressures of assimilation. In closed Kurdish spheres, they express no feelings of inferiority. Eidheim writes that his Lappish informants expressed suspicions that their low standards of living derived from their "being of an inferior race" (1969:44). My informants, when the topics of lower level of education, violence against women in the Kurdish areas, or the hardships of village life came up, often explained this as a result of the Turkish oppression. These problems weren't seen as something specifically Kurdish, but rather problems deriving from the continuous oppression of their right to live as Kurds. The stigma

connected to being Kurdish in public spheres was seen as a result of the Turkish oppression, not as a sign that being Kurdish was in fact inferior to being Turkish.

Separate Worlds

The various strategies of avoiding stigma described above, largely render the everyday lives of the Kurdish population in Istanbul invisible to the Turkish majority. This explains the reactions I got when entering the field: The non-Kurdish people I spoke with knew very little about the Kurds, even the one's who shared their city, and most found it an unpleasant topic. In general, those who were not Kurdish immediately asked me why on earth I would want to know more about the Kurds, and mentioning of my project or Kurds in general often became very unpleasant. The lack of a "platform for dialogue" described by the *Third International Conference on EU Turkey and the Kurds* was obvious.

A Turkish woman I got to know quite well, who had lived her whole life in Istanbul, asked me what the Kurds really wanted. She knew that I spent time in Kurdish homes with Kurdish families, and asked me how they lived, what they ate and what their demands were really all about. When I explained that Kurds want many different things, and that among their top priorities was the right to speak a Kurdish language, she was puzzled. "But, don't they want their own state?" she said.

This general lack of knowledge about who the Kurds are and what they want may be part of the reason why the relationship between Kurds and Turks is so tense: The only times my Turkish informants heard about the Kurds, was when the conflict in the South-East escalated, or when a bomb went off somewhere. My informants' strategies to avoid the potential stigma connected to displays of Kurdish identity in Istanbul, serve to widen the gap between Kurds and Turks.

As long as my informants don't display their Kurdish identity in public spheres, they aren't recognised as Kurds. Thus, the ways in which their ethnic identities are oppressed are also invisible: by not displaying Kurdishness, the stigma is not realised. Still, it's there in potential, regulating my informants expressions: the oppression is visible only for those who are victims to it.

Further, the ability to hide one's Kurdish identity is not equally distributed among the city's Kurdish population: For the old women in the *gecekondu* area, who speak no or only poor Turkish, hiding their ethnic identity is practically impossible. Again the intersectional perspective proves valuable: As long as functioning in public sphere

depends on being able to hide one's ethnic identity, this is affected by other individual positionings than ethnic identity, such as gender, age, economic status and level of education. These power grids mutually coconstruct one another (Prins 2006), and this irreducible quality of power structures is evident in the three stories: Being Kurdish in Istanbul does not have the same implications for the daily lives of these differently situated Kurds.

5

Kurdish language

As described in chapter three, the language situation in my field is complex, largely because the use of the Kurdish languages has been prohibited the better part of the 20th century. In this chapter, I touch upon some of the most important legal restrictions laid down by the Turkish state, making the closed Kurdish spheres the only arenas for keeping the language alive. I then address how my differently positioned informants relate to the Kurdish languages on two levels: (1) as a medium of communication and (2) as a symbol of belonging to the Kurdish community.

The history of oppression of Kurdish linguistic rights in Turkey began with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, and struggles over language and linguistic rights have been an important part of both the nation-building process in Turkey and the Kurdish demands for cultural freedom. Historically, people living in the Ottoman Empire enjoyed linguistic freedom; they could speak, teach and publish in any language they pleased. Until the end of World War One (WWI), the Kurds lived in multicultural and multilingual societies (Smits and Gündüz-Hoşgör 2003, Ahmad 2003, Benhabib and Isiksel 2006). WWI marked the end of the already smouldering Ottoman era, and in 1920 the Kurds were promised a Kurdish state at the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres. Three years later, the Treaty of Lausanne was signed. A Kurdish state was not even mentioned, and what is today The Republic of Turkey was established. The Kurds found themselves divided between the modern states of

Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, and the development of the Kurdish languages has since depended on the freedoms the Kurds acquired in each of the four states.²¹

Atatürk, when signing the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, guaranteed that the linguistic rights of the new country's minorities wouldn't be threatened. The treaty contained clauses to ensure the linguistic rights of the citizens of the new Turkish republic, guaranteeing that no restrictions would be imposed on the uses of any language in any part of society, be it private, commerce, religion, in the press or at political meetings.²² However, linguistic unification is often an integral aspect of nation-building projects (Eriksen 1992), and in March 1924 an official decree banned all Kurdish schools, organisations and publications. This was the beginning of a legislation that gradually banned all forms of expressions in a Kurdish language, and speaking, singing or publishing in a Kurdish language was prohibited by law until 1991.²³ (See also Ahmad 2003, Ergil 2000, Eriksen 1992.)

Since 1991, when the law prohibiting the use of other languages than Turkish was abolished, the situation for linguistic minorities has gradually improved, largely due to Turkey's EU accession process: In 2001, new legislation allowed publishing in Kurdish languages, and since 2002 it is legal to teach Kurdish languages in private language institutions. It is, however, still illegal to teach Kurdish languages to children, or to teach in a Kurdish language. Smits and Gündüz-Hoşgör (2003) estimate that between 12 and 16 percent of the population in Turkey had a Kurdish language as their mother tongue around 1990.

The linguistic oppression my informants are subject to in Istanbul, is a result of the historical and political processes of creating Turkey. As a result, Turkish is the language most commonly known and used by my Kurdish informants.

Linguistic seclusion

How the legislation regulating the use of Kurdish language affects my informants in their everyday lives depends on which languages they know and which languages they feel confident using. One year after my fieldwork, I returned to Istanbul and

²¹ Reference: Joyce Blau: "The Kurdish Language and Literature", <http://www.institutkurde.org/en/language/> reading date: 18.09.2006.

²² Reference: Treaty of Lausanne, <http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/1918p/lausanne.html> (Reading date 19.09.2006)

²³ *Recognition of linguistic rights? The impact of pro-EU reforms in Turkey* <http://www.khrp.org/publish/p2005/Recognition%20of%20Linguistic%20Rights%20FFM.pdf> (Reading date: 28.10.2006)

visited Ayşe and her family in the *gecekondu*. We talked about the year that had passed, and about the changes in their neighbourhood. Ayşe still hadn't found a job, and during summer, when her sisters-in-law were off visiting their families in their native villages, Ayşe had to stay at home with her mother.

I told them that I would be leaving for Norway the next day. Ayşe looked at me and said: "What a pity you didn't come here tomorrow". Puzzled, I repeated that I had to return to Norway the following day, and she laughed and said: "No, I mean *tomorrow*", again using the Turkish word *yarın*. Fearing that I was mixing up the words, I explained that I thought *yarın* was the day to come, *gelecek gün*, while *dün* was the word for the day that had passed, *geçen gün*, and that on the day to come I wouldn't be in Istanbul. Ayşe paused and, a bit embarrassed, said that I was right. She explained that she hadn't spoken Turkish for such a long time that it was her who was confusing the words.

I certainly don't tell this story to ridicule Ayşe's language skills. But it gives an impression of how separated she is from everything Turkish in her daily life. Ayşe and her family live in Istanbul, far from the Kurdish areas, in a city where expressing one's Kurdish identity is far from unproblematic. Still, she and the other women who share the household, rarely speak Turkish: the language in the house is Kurmanji. They told me they only speak Turkish when I'm there, since I don't know Kurmanji: "*Türkçe mecburen konuşuyoruz*", we speak Turkish only when we have to, they repeatedly informed me. The only times they had to speak Turkish, except when I was there, was outside the house shopping or running an errand. Most often Ayşe did these chores – her sisters-in-law didn't leave the house unless accompanied by their husbands.

Language in the *gecekondu*

In Ayşe's household, three generations share a little shack with two bedrooms, living-room, kitchen and bathroom. The paint peels from the damp walls, and the stained carpets covering the floors bear evidence of a crowded home inhabited by a flock of active children. In spring, when the climate is mild, the couches outside is the main arena of social life in the household. With a tarpaulin serving as shelter from the sun and occasional rain, the oldest lady of the household sits on the couch paying attention to all that is happening in the busy courtyard, occasionally tossing a shoe or other loose items at her grandchildren if they're too noisy. The old woman's Turkish

is less than eloquent; trying to communicate with me, she begins her sentences in heavily accented Turkish, switching to Kurmanji in mid-story. Her children, daughters-in-law and grandchildren laugh, asking me if I understand. Not to be rude I say that my Turkish isn't good enough, a comment that reaps another wave of laughter. "We don't understand her either", they say still laughing.

Her mix of languages is ridiculed. Still, while making fun of their mother's poor Turkish, her children are proud to say that their youngest children only understand and speak Kurmanji. Ayşe, pointing to her three-year-old nephew, once proudly demonstrated this point: "*Gel, gel*", she says, the Turkish word for "come". The little boy stares up at her, clinging to the couch, struggling to understand while not losing his balance. Ayşe repeats her command in Kurmanji: The boy's face lights up as he starts moving towards her.

Two of the girls in the household are five and seven years old. The oldest one has gone to school for a year, the youngest one will start next fall. They spend their free time running around in the neighbourhood with the other kids in the area, and are practically bilingual. "*Bak*", the oldest one says in Turkish, asking me to look at the notebook I use for Turkish vocabulary. She has written a full page of Kurmanji words and their Turkish translations, so that I can start learning. Her younger sister can't write, but assists with ideas and corrects her sisters mistakes. The oldest girl has just learnt how to write, but only in Turkish. Spelling the Kurmanji words is a creative exercise. Ayşe, their aunt, has just finished a literacy course and tries to help out without much success, although she speaks Kurmanji quite well and her Turkish isn't too bad. Quite often the girls disagree on a Kurmanji word, and they turn to their grandmother for assistance. She, in turn, can neither read nor write, and she doesn't know much Turkish, so my homework is made by a joint endeavour across generations. This one family shows a multitude of different language skills, all results of their personal biographies: It takes the combined skills and efforts of three generations of women to agree on which words mean what, and how the words are spelled.

Two of the old woman's married sons share the same home, as is tradition among Kurds in Turkey: the women move to the man's household, and if they can't afford a place of their own, they share the house of the man's parents, married and unmarried brothers, and his unmarried sisters. It is no coincidence that the men are left out of this story: They weren't home at the time, as they spent most of their waking hours

elsewhere, working or drinking tea with friends. In these households, the women almost without exception don't work outside the household, and they rarely need to leave the house or interact with people who don't speak Kurmanji. The two married sons are responsible for all contact with the government and other officials. They, like the majority of Kurdish males, speak Turkish fluently, though their accent may reveal that they are originally from the south-east. The youngest brother's wife speaks Turkish quite well, while the older brother's wife feels insecure and prefers Kurmanji.

Ayşe's mother speaks almost no Turkish. She is free to leave the house whenever she wishes, but she only goes to the market or to relatives living near by. She told me, letting Ayşe translate what she didn't manage to express in Turkish, that she didn't dare leave the house to go to new places. How would she find her way back if lost, she asked. She can't read, and she doesn't trust people in the street to help her when they realise she's Kurdish. The little Turkish she speaks is grammatically incorrect, and with a heavy accent betraying her Kurdish identity. Her language situation restricts her freedom of choices.

The fear of being recognised as a Kurd when addressed by people in the street asking for directions or the time, applies for her daughter Ayşe as well, though her Turkish is much better than her mother's. Her family didn't explicitly deny her the possibility of going out on her own, but it was seen as inappropriate to roam around without some plan or a chore to do, and during the periods when she didn't have a job or went to the course at the NGO, she was more or less stuck at home. She was allowed to leave the house in my company, and we often went for walks in the area to have a chance to talk without her whole family and all her brothers' children distracting, or we went to the market or the grocer. When approached by people in the street, Ayşe never answered any questions, she simply told them to keep away. "I don't trust Turks", was her explanation. Thus, although leaving the house, her interaction with the Turkish population in the area was kept to a minimum. The men, on the other hand, are responsible for supporting the family: they have to interact with the Turkish majority in public spheres, and as a result they switch between Kurmanji and Turkish without much effort.

It seems clear that being able to use Kurmanji in public space would increase these women's freedom in everyday life, as well as their confidence and ability to communicate with people outside the family: Ayşe's mother can leave the house whenever she wants to, but she can't do so in a meaningful way. No one, neither the

members of the Turkish majority, nor the people in her own household, actively limit her freedom, but her situation – which is largely a result of both male dominance in public space, her lack of Turkish skills and the hostility of the majority society – is part of a larger structure affecting the lives of many Kurdish migrant women in Istanbul (see eg. Wedel 2001).

Domestic culture, domestic language

The linguistic oppression by the Turkish state is coupled with a linguistic oppression within the closed, Kurdish sphere of the household with a clearly gendered dimension: in this family it was not considered important that the women learn Turkish, even though the family had no plans of leaving Istanbul. The policies of the Turkish government have forced the Kurds to hide their Kurdish identity, which therefore has been kept alive within the domestic sphere. Simultaneously, in families like Ayşe's with a patriarchal structure, the lives of women are closely linked to the domestic sphere, the closed Kurdish sphere. Thus, the lives of women, and the safeguarding of Kurdish identity, among other things through keeping the language alive, are intimately interwoven, strengthening the role of Kurdish women as symbolic border guards of Kurdish culture (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995, Yuval-Davis 1997). While the men interact with the Turkish majority in order to support their women and children, the women are 'kept pure' within the closed Kurdish sphere of the household and the nearby households of relatives, with Kurmanji as the language of everyday life (Klein 2001).

Smits and Gündüz-Hoşgör (2003) point out that language is important in transmitting the ethnic identity to new generations, and for the feeling of belonging to the ethnic group. Ayşe and others in her situation, mainly women, become important as bearers of the mother tongue, responsible for bringing knowledge of the Kurdish languages on to the next generation, as they are the ones who most often have the least to do with the Turkish majority. While they value being able to use their mother tongue, not feeling confident speaking Turkish gives them a handicap when it comes to interaction with society outside the household: Many of the women are at the mercy of their husbands when it comes to dealing with Turkish officials or sending their children to school.

The lack of Turkish skills is identified by several womens' organizations in Turkey (eg. Selis, Gökkuşığı and Amargi) and academics (eg. Wedel 2001, Mojab

2001, Smits and Gündüz-Hoşgör 2003, Secor 2004) as one of the major obstacles for Kurdish women in their struggle to gain control over their own lives. Smits and Gündüz-Hoşgör (2003) analyse the situation of non-Turkish speaking citizens of Turkey, and, in line with Bourdieu (1991), they claim that the ability to speak a country's dominant language fluently is a form of 'linguistic capital', making social mobility easier. They find that the overwhelming majority of non-Turkish speaking individuals in Turkey are Kurdish and Arabic women.

The situation of the women in Songül's household shows in which ways not knowing Turkish, the language of the state, limits their freedom and confines them to the closed Kurdish sphere of their homes. However, as I will show, the gender dimension is not the only relevant one in understanding how language limits the freedoms of Kurds in Istanbul.

Intersections in linguistic skills

Gender, while being one important differentiating factor when it comes to the linguistic skills of my informants, is not the only differentiating factor. The consequences of the linguistic oppression for individual Kurds, vary according to the positioning of the individuals on axes of power connected to other social divisions than gender.

One of the houses down the street from Ayşe's house, the house of her maternal uncle, is a meeting place for the women in the area. They come there during the day with their children, while the men are out working. The women sit outside sipping tea, knitting, and gossiping. Most days at least three generations are present, and the pattern concerning age and linguistic skills described in Ayşe's household, seems to a large degree to apply to these women as well. All communication is in Kurmanji, and only when I'm present do some of the women speak Turkish, though only when addressing me. The older women often don't know Turkish, or they simply feel more comfortable speaking Kurmanji. Sometimes a couple of teenage girls stop by. They have learnt some phrases in English at school, and speak excellent Turkish, while having Kurmanji as their mother tongue. They translate if some of the old women tell a story in Kurmanji, so that I can understand.

None of the women work outside the house, but they often knit or make jewellery that their husbands sell. The women are all from the Kurdish areas, and have moved to Istanbul after marriage. They only leave the house in order to visit neighbouring

families. The children who are old enough go to school nearby, they speak both Turkish and Kurmanji fluently, and some have started to learn some English. The girls among them are the first generation of women to get a formal education, their mothers are all illiterate.

The language skills of these women depend on several factors: age is relevant, as most of the women from the older generations grew up in the south-east, where it was easier to get by only knowing a Kurdish language, and none of them have jobs outside the household. Level of education plays a significant role: the seven year old girl in Ayşe's household already both speaks and writes Turkish, after going to school for only a year, while she only speaks her mother tongue, Kurmanji. She is literate in the dominant language, but not in her mother tongue. Ayşe practically grew up migrating: the family travelled from place to place for several years, taking odd jobs along the way. The family was poor and needed her hands in seasonal manual labour collecting cotton or tomatoes for farmers from she was six years old. As mentioned, she has had jobs for short periods after arriving in Istanbul, and attended the course at the NGO. Thus, she has no formal education, but learned Turkish through having jobs where she had to communicate in Turkish. The youngest children know only Kurmanji, as they are born in a Kurdish family where Kurmanji is the language of the household. The ones who are approaching school age, however, have picked up the Turkish language by playing with the other children in the area, who are a mix of Kurds and Turks.

Linguistic resistance

The decision in Ayşe's household that Kurmanji is the preferred language and Turkish to be avoided, can be seen as a strategy for maintaining the household as a closed Kurdish sphere. In the Turkish dominated city, their home is the only place they manage to resist the pressures of assimilation they encounter in public spheres. While the lives of the women in the *gecekondu* are limited by not knowing Turkish, using their mother tongue is simultaneously a form of resistance: instead of giving in to the claim of the Turkish state that Turkish is the only language of the republic, they live the better part of their lives using only Kurmanji.

Survival of the minority languages, despite the pressure from the Turkish state, is an indication that the minority identity is relevant in the lives of those using the language. Giving in and adopting the majority's language often lead to loss of tradition and cultural autonomy (Eriksen 2002:315). Keeping the language alive, is a

way of proving and maintaining the existence of the Kurds as a group, and symbolizing that one's Kurdish identity is relevant both in self-presentation and in self-perception.

Mehmet and his costudents in university, interpret the situation of the Kurdish languages as a symptom of the situation of the Kurdish people in Turkey. As mentioned, Mehmet is part of a group publishing a periodical on Kurdish language, currently focusing on Kurmanji. Their aim is to restore the vocabulary from the beginning of the 20th century, and to make the language suitable for all purposes. They translate academic literature, poetry and fiction into Kurmanji, and works in Kurmanji into Turkish or English. They also print articles concerning linguistic rights of minorities, models for bilingual education, or the effects of use of mother tongue in schools.

The work done by the students can also be understood as a form of linguistic resistance. Codifying the language that has been confined to use within Kurdish homes for almost a century, as well as applying it for all sorts of writings, contributes to the status of the Kurdish language, and thereby to the status of the Kurds as a people (Eriksen 1992). By bringing the language out from the private sphere, and inserting it in the public, Kurmanji acquires the necessary qualities of a state-bearing language, that Mehmet argues it has been deprived of.

Mehmet, while considering Kurmanji his mother tongue, has few problems manoeuvring on the university campus, displaying his Kurdish identity only when in appropriate surroundings. However, it is he, not the women confined to the *gecekondu*, who is making an effort to increase the status and applicability of the Kurdish languages. Mehmet's capability of switching between appropriate behaviour within the Turkish and Kurdish contexts, is in sharp contrast to the women in the *gecekondu*, who have little knowledge of the linguistic and cultural codes of the Turkish majority. Eriksen (1992) argues that in order for linguistic resistance to be efficient, the minority must master the cultural codes of the majority as well as that of the minority. Mehmet's social positioning enables him to participate in active linguistic resistance. While the illiterate women don't have the same resources, the possibility of using Kurmanji in all aspects of life would have had a greater impact on their everyday life and opportunities than it has for Mehmet. Again, these women are left at the mercy of other members of the Kurdish community, Kurds who are differently situated on the power grids of other social divisions than the ethnic

division, and who possess the necessary knowledge of the dominant language and cultural codes.

Competing languages

At the work-training course in the NGO, a full day was spent on teaching the participants how to apply for a job. The thorough explanation included everything from searching for places where they needed help, writing the application and curriculum vitae, arranging for ways in which the potential employer might reach them, and what to wear and say during a job interview. When explaining what a cv was, the woman leading the course said that they should list all their skills and qualifications, and specifically mentioned knowledge of languages as an advantage. One of the participants raised her hand, and asked if she should write Turkish or Kurdish first. “I’m not sure you should write Kurdish”, the woman answered. All present raised their hands. Some said that Kurdish was their real mother tongue, and that it should be listed before Turkish. Others asked if knowing Kurdish would make it more difficult for them to get jobs, while others again insisted that knowing Kurdish was an unquestionable asset, and should help them get jobs. The woman leading the course had trouble answering. She never explicitly said that writing Kurdish as mother tongue in a cv would make it more difficult to find a job, but she didn’t deny it either.

This discussion indicates the position of the Kurdish languages in Turkish society, and how feelings are aroused when the status of Kurdish language versus the status of Turkish language is explicitly brought up – including the close connection between the status of a language and those who speak it.

Language and the state

For some months during my fieldwork, a Kurdish language course gave classes in Kurmanji. In order to improve his spelling and grammar, Mehmet attended the course, and I went to a class there to see what was taught. It soon became clear that the students knew how to speak the language, but had trouble when it came to spelling and grammar. There were several discussions concerning vocabulary, as the students came from different parts of the Kurdish areas. I was told that the variations of Kurmanji dialects alone was so big that there were almost 20 words meaning ‘car’, and that Kurds living in the Kurdish region can hear which village another Kurd grew

up in only by the variations in vocabulary. By taking the course, what was an oral language for most of the students was slowly transformed into a written language with spelling norms and grammatical rules.

The course closed down after only a few months. I was surprised, as I had understood the opening of the courses as a victory in the fight for linguistic rights, and for improving the status of the Kurdish languages. The leader of the Kurdish Language Institute explained the problem: the changes in the law that made it possible for these courses to open, treated the Kurdish languages as if they were foreign languages; the same rules applied to teaching Kurdish as applied to courses in French or German, and the courses shut down because the institute didn't accept that the mother tongue of the country's Kurds was treated as a foreign language. The permission to teach the Kurdish languages to adults was seen as a deception by the Turkish government: By allowing Kurdish language courses, he told me, the government hoped to get rid of the demand for mother tongue in primary education, which in his opinion was the only solution for the future of the Kurdish languages in Turkey. Being able to teach the Kurdish languages to adults was not enough: Their demand includes the use of mother tongue in primary education, and the right to teach *in* the Kurdish languages, so that those who don't speak Turkish also get the opportunity to educate themselves.

The choice to close down the language course in objection to treating Kurdish as a foreign language, illustrates how languages that are not formally connected to the state are still at the mercy of it: In order for the Kurds in Turkey to freely develop the Kurdish language, the Turkish laws must be changed. The struggle for the right to speak and use the Kurdish languages in all aspects of life, is based in a power asymmetry (Eriksen 1992:313): While the Turkish language is institutionalised and the legitimate language of the state, the Kurdish languages have never had the opportunity to become unified through being a state-bearing or bureaucratic language (Bourdieu 1991). As becomes evident, language is not a neutral tool for communication. Rather, language is part of "relations of power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized" (Bourdieu 1991:37).

The Turkish language, being the official, is known and recognised all over Turkey, as a result of the institutional conditions contributing to its generalised codification and imposition (Bourdieu 1991). Being the language of the Turkish state,

all linguistic practices are measured against the legitimate, dominant practice of speaking Turkish (Bourdieu 1991:53). For the Kurds in Istanbul it is the language of the majority population and of the state that has denied the mere existence of the Kurds. Turkish language, while having the privilege of being watched over and nurtured by the *Türk Dil Kurumu*, established by Atatürk in 1938, is the language of all contact between the citizens of Turkey and the state institutions. Opposition to this dominant status of the Turkish language depends on knowledge of the Turkish language. Without knowledge of the dominant language, gaining a position of power that exceeds the closed Kurdish spheres is difficult.

The competence adequate to produce sentences that are likely to be understood may be quite inadequate to produce sentences that are likely to be *listened to*, likely to be recognized as *acceptable* in all the situations in which there is occasion to speak. ... Speakers lacking the legitimate competence are *de facto* excluded from the social domains in which this competence is required, or are condemned to silence.

Bourdieu 1991:55

As shown in the case of the women in the *gecekondu*, those who don't know Turkish are situated at the margins of society, in largely uninfluential positions. Speaking only a Kurdish language makes interaction with large parts of society impossible, so that important arenas are out of reach (Wedel 2001).

Choosing one's language

The Kurdish languages are important in different ways for all my informants, whether spoken, spoken *of* or used as a tool in resisting Turkish dominance by increasing the status of the Kurdish language. They all consider knowledge of the Kurdish languages an asset, while those who grew up speaking Turkish often express a wish to learn the language of their parents and grandparents.

Mehmet grew up speaking only Kurmanji until starting school at the age of six, and considers it his mother tongue. Some of the other students in the group publishing the periodical also have one of the Kurdish languages as their mother tongue, but as they never learnt it in school, the spelling and grammar is difficult for them. Some only have a vague memory of their grandparents speaking a language they didn't understand, while others again knew it as children, but stopped using it when reaching school age. Nursel, one of the girls in the group, told me that she had just started

learning Kurmanji in the private course, but that she wasn't half as good as the others: While her grandmother had spoken only Kurmanji, she herself was raised as a Turk, her parents never mentioning her Kurdish ancestry. It was only after she started her education in Istanbul, far away from her parents in Mersin, a city by the Mediterranean coast in the south-eastern region, that she investigated her past and started to call herself Kurdish.

Nursel joined the editing group of the Kurdish Language periodical, and at a meeting some of the guys commented on her not speaking Kurmanji, telling her jokingly that she should study harder so that they could have their meetings in Kurdish, not Turkish. She said that she would. Özlem, another Kurdish student in the same university had ongoing discussions with other Kurdish students due to the fact that she preferred learning French or Spanish before learning a Kurdish language. Her opinion was that it would be more useful to her in her studies, and afterwards trying to find a job. Özlem insisted on her right to "be Kurdish" only in the situations when she herself found it appropriate, and to choose for herself which languages she found it useful to learn – for her own sake. Mehmet commented on her argument when she was not present. "She says these other languages are more useful, but more useful for what?" he asked. Mehmet often emphasised how important it was that people like himself, Kurdish students and academics, worked on the Kurdish language to make it encompass other parts of life than the private sphere that it had been confined to for so long. He described it as an obligation. Having a well developed language that is used by many is important to him, as part of his Kurdish identity. Years of oppression has left their language in a scattered state, and Mehmet considers it their *responsibility* to improve the situation.

Kurdish language as symbol

Kurdish language and the use of Turkish versus one of the Kurdish languages was a frequently discussed topic among my informants. Gülhan and Özlem, the women in the Kurdish newspaper, don't speak any of the Kurdish languages. Their parents speak Zaza, the branch of Kurdish language spoken by the smallest group of Kurds in Turkey. They have learned only a few words, and grew up speaking Turkish. On several occasions, they said they wished that the newly opened Kurdish language course would start offering courses in Zaza, not only Kurmanji, so that they could learn. I overheard them discuss the differences between the two Kurdish languages

with Kurmanji-speaking friends, trying to recall their childhood memories of the occasional words and phrases that were used by their parents. According to my informants, the Kurdish languages spoken in Turkey are so different that speakers of Zaza are unable to understand speakers of Kurmanji, although there is some overlap.

Several times a week, we went to a local budget diner to have lunch or dinner, or just to chat with the people working there. Passing the huge piles of rotating meat, *tavuk döner* and *et döner* made for the traditional kebabs, we reached the counter to choose our meal. All the people working in the diner are Kurdish, and they make no secret of it: “Half of this city is ours”, one of the döner choppers said one day, laughing. One of the service boys often joined us at the table, Gülhan and Özlem knew him from the diner. They urged him to speak Kurmanji; he speaks the language excellently, and receives admiring comments from other Kurds because of his fluency. If someone had questions about vocabulary, he could always help. As my two informants didn’t speak any of the Kurdish languages, they always spoke Turkish together, and except from occasional Kurmanji sentences from the service boy, I rarely heard anyone actually speak a Kurdish language in the diner. While not being able to actually speak Kurdish, they were eager to speak *of* it. Thus, in contexts when those present weren’t able to use a Kurdish language, the Kurdish languages served as a topic of conversation, rather than the medium. Still, it left no doubt that those participating in the conversation were Kurds.

When speaking of Kurdish language, my informants referred to it as *Kürtçe*, Kurdish. Only when asked, they specified which of the Kurdish languages they meant. When it came to actual use of the language, this was often inhibited by the fact that the Kurds in Istanbul have different biographies concerning language: Even in the theatre of the Kurdish cultural centre *Mesopotamya Kültür Merkezi*, parts of the play was performed in Turkish, as they couldn’t expect the audience to know Kurmanji, the language of the actors in that particular play. Also, in gatherings where all those present ‘speak Kurdish’, it’s often necessary to speak Turkish, since some know Kurmanji while others know Zaza; During lunch in the building of the Kurdish newspaper, conversations were in Turkish, as some of those working there knew Zaza, some knew Kurmanji, and some knew neither.

Using the term *Kürtçe*, Kurdish, when talking about the language of the Kurds, gives an impression that the Kurds as a people have a common language, distinct from the languages spoken in the four nation-states the majority of Kurds inhabit, and

it functions to legitimate their existence as a distinct people. However, as portrayed by my informants' various knowledge of the languages spoken by Kurds in Turkey, this is not the case: the ethnic division between Kurds and Turks in Turkey is not coupled with a corresponding linguistic division.²⁴ However, this discrepancy is undercommunicated by my informants, who almost consistently use the term *Kürtçe* when talking about any of the Kurdish languages.

A Kurdish language is one of the most concrete proofs that the Kurds are a group distinct from the Turks, and thus the maintenance of the language is, and has been, an important aspect in the reproduction of Kurdish culture (Klein 2001:36). Culture and tradition are usually partly composed by a specific language, and language may be understood as symbolic border guard (Yuval-Davis 1997:23). Allowing languages to die, and thereby giving way to the dominant language of the nation-state, indicates that the groups, formerly differentiated by languages, become culturally more alike. Also, it often means that they are more tightly integrated at the abstract level of the state (Eriksen 1992:319).

Among the Kurds in Istanbul, the effects of the Turkish nation-building process was visible in the ways they related to the Kurdish languages. All my informants in some way or other refer to 'Kurdish' as their mother tongue, or, if they never learned it, at least as the 'language of the Kurds'.

Kurdish language both in use and when spoken of has many of the qualities that makes a symbol strong and useful in terms of generating and preserving a sense of common identity and community: It is imprecise, as Kurds in Turkey relate to the Kurdish languages in different ways, and open to different interpretations (Cohen 1985:18). Differently situated people can relate to the concept of 'Kurdish language' based on their own life situation. The fact that Kurdish language has been banned by the Turkish government for the better part of the last century has contributed to this misdistribution of language skills, but simultaneously strengthens the role of Kurdish language as a symbol of Kurdish community. Eriksen (1992) argues that a tightly knit community is difficult to imagine without shared language forms, through which members of the community are able to understand each other. According to the ways in which my informants either speak or speak of *Kürtçe*, I argue that their imagined community is coupled with an *imagined mother tongue*. The fragmentation of the

²⁴ Including the Kurdish areas in Iraq, Iran and Syria only serves to make the picture more complex: while the languages in Turkey are spelled with Latin letters, the other ones use the Arabic alphabet.

Kurdish languages and the vast amount of dialects and diverse vocabulary is undercommunicated to benefit the image of mother tongue as a unifying symbol of the Kurds.

Concluding remarks

The process of nation-building in Turkey was simultaneously a process towards a monolingual nation. Linguistic oppressions are often not of a physical, spectacular kind, they are sometimes not even articulated as forms of oppression (Eriksen 1992). The linguistic oppression in Turkey is less explicit after the changes of the laws regulating uses of language, but for those who don't speak Turkish, it still limits their chances of taking control over their lives and participating in civil society outside the closed Kurdish spheres. The various linguistic capacities of my informants illustrate some of the consequences of this language policy. The long-term oppression of the Kurdish languages presents yet an obstacle in the lives of the Kurdish women in the Istanbul *gecekondu*, who, because of their social positionings, don't know the language of the state, the media and the general population in their neighbourhood. While learning Turkish might increase their freedom of movement and their possibilities in the city, it would simultaneously mean accepting that the Kurdish language they already know is deficient, or at least inferior to the Turkish language.

While the claim for linguistic rights is considered important by all my informants, and *Kürtçe* is used as a symbol of Kurdish unity, the ways in which the linguistic oppression by the Turkish state affects them, differ, as do the ways of resisting this oppression. The consequences of not being able to use Kurmanji in the public sphere vary according to individual positionings in social space. For those who don't know the dominant language at all, it is more than a symbolic barrier. It is an actual barrier which may hamper the individual's use of public resources, as well as their citizen rights (Smits and Gündüz-Hoşgör 2003).

Speaking and speaking *of* the Kurdish languages is but one of the ways in which my informants communicate their Kurdish identity. In the following chapter, I will describe four more symbols of Kurdish community as displayed by my informants in various settings. While analysing in which ways they serve to invoke a sense of commitment to the Kurdish community, I also look into how these symbols affect individual Kurds differently according to their positioning in social space.

6

Staying Kurdish

In the previous chapter, I showed how Kurdish language works as a symbol, creating a sense of belonging to the Kurdish community. As mentioned, most of my informants have never met, so the sense of sameness had to derive from something other than spending time together. Speaking or speaking *of* Kurdish language turned out to be one such symbol of community. The Kurds have some visible symbols as well: at the Newroz celebration, the traditional red, green and yellow of the Kurdish flag used in Northern Iraq, was displayed. However, these symbols are not used in the everyday life of Kurds in Istanbul. As shown in chapter four, displaying Kurdish identity is not in general done overtly outside the closed Kurdish spheres. My experience is that Kurdish identity is communicated through *topics of conversation* rather than visible images, an imagined Kurdish mother tongue being one such topic.

To understand how Kurdish ethnic identity gained relevance in my informants' lives, I needed to figure out how this identity was constructed, and through which symbols it was communicated (Cohen 1985). After spending time with and getting to know my informants, I slowly started registering recurring themes including a 'we' and an 'us' referring to the Kurds as a people. Interpreting social space as a symbolic space, these symbols have the effect of communicating belonging to one specific group (Bourdieu 1989)

I have already described how the Turks are continuously constituted as the “relevant other” of the Kurds in Istanbul, the incarnation of what the Kurds were *not*. What they *were* was presented through a set of symbols, out of which I identified a few. In this chapter I present four new symbols, and analyse how they are used to mark the boundaries of Kurdish identity in Istanbul, and their role in the symbolic construction of Kurdish community (Cohen 1985).

When presenting the symbols of Kurdish unity in Istanbul, I will also address how they are interpreted by differently situated actors, to see if their impact on individual freedom of choice varies according to individual situation.

It is always in our hearts – Kurdistan as symbol and solid ground

‘Kurdistan’ is in my opinion one of the strongest and most politically potent symbols of the Kurdish community, particularly after the PKK started its violent opposition against the Turkish authorities in 1984, claiming a free Kurdish state. The term ‘Kurdistan’ refers to the area divided between Syria, Iran, Iraq and Turkey where the majority of the Kurds live, and was first used as a geographical term by the Saljuqs, a Turkish speaking group originating in central Asia, in the twelfth century (McDowall 1997). Today, speaking of Kurdistan entails a claim to a piece of what is today part of the Republic of Turkey, in Atatürks terms, an ‘undivisible unity’ (Ahmad 2003).

For my informants, the part of Kurdistan that is now a part of Turkey is the region where they grew up or the home of their relatives, a place they or their families have left for various reasons: to find better jobs, to pursue higher education, or to escape from the armed conflict between the Turkish government and the PKK. They all have close, personal ties to the area. Symbolically, it serves as a common *memleket*, homeland, something they perceive as rightfully theirs.

The connection between the Kurds as a group and a piece of land is, as I discussed in the introduction, politically potent. When my informants mentioned Kurdistan, it was done in a whisper, unless we were in someone’s home or absolutely sure no one who shouldn’t hear it was within earshot. Often the term *bölgede*, meaning *in the region*, was used when talking about something that happened in the Kurdish areas: without using the word Kurdistan, all present knew what was meant. Each time I was introduced to a Kurd in Istanbul, one of the first things that were established was the persons *memleket*, homeland, signified by the town he or she was originally from – emphasizing that their roots were not in Istanbul.

It is not possible to have a free Kurdistan”, Serdar, a Kurdish informant, told me with a shrug. He lives in Diyarbakır in the Kurdish regions, and explained to me that with the political situation in the area – being divided between Syria, Iran, Iraq and Turkey – it wouldn’t even be a very good idea to have a sovereign state. The impact of major powers like the USA in the Middle East would, in his opinion, make it a question of time before some foreign nation seized control in order to access the natural resources in the region. “Our people are not educated, and we don’t have experience running a state. Maybe in the future. Kurdistan always lives in our hearts” he said, pounding his chest.

Kurdistan from a distance

There is little of Serdar’s realism in the way Ayşe’s mother relates to Kurdistan: “*Memleketimiz*”, she said, leaning towards me in the sofa outside the *gecekondu* in Istanbul: our homeland. She would use the term to describe her homeland on two levels. First, the area surrounding the city of Mardin, where she and her family lived before they migrated and ended up in Istanbul. Mardin lies in the part of the area referred to as Kurdistan that is within the borders of Turkey, just north of the border to Iraq, and it’s one of the areas that was most severely exposed to the forced displacements of the Kurds during the 1990s. Second, she would use it to describe the homeland of the Kurds. Using her own version of Turkish grammar, almost all her stories started with the same phrase: “*Bu memleket var, ya*,” meaning something like “you know this homeland”, and the stories were about life in the Kurdish regions. The tea from Kurdistan was better than the Turkish tea, she said, the people worked harder, they were poorer, but it was also much more beautiful than Istanbul. “*İstanbul pis*”, Istanbul is dirty, she said, underlining that their presence there was involuntary.

Her oldest son, Haco²⁵, had a more explicitly political approach: being literate, he reads newspapers, and he discusses the political situation with the other men at work or in the Kurdish cultural centre. “Apo did the wrong thing,” he told me, using the nickname of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned PKK leader. Öcalan had just made a statement through his attorneys, stating that the best solution to the Kurdish question would be a democratic confederation.²⁶ “We have been living all over the country, in the line of fire. We have been fighting for Kurdistan, not a democratic Turkey,” Haco

²⁵ *Ha-djo*, the last syllable as in *banjo*.

²⁶ Source: “PKK's New Tactic: Democratic Confederation” *Zaman Online* 21.03.2005: <http://www.zaman.com/?bl=national&alt=&trh=20050321&hn=17675> (Reading date 13.11.2006)

explained. “Look at us, how we live here. This is not a good life, we’re poor, and we have almost nothing. It is better to live in the mountains”, he said. He told me his wife’s brothers were *dağda*, in the mountains, an expression used about those who are guerrilla.

Ayşe, Haco’s younger sister, also refers to Kurdistan as their real homeland. Her own feeling of disempowerment is evident in her explanations of their living conditions in Istanbul. Living in a *gecekondu* adds to the temporary quality of their life in Istanbul – they never know when someone will claim the land they live on, tear down their house and leave them homeless. Ayşe and her family are waiting for the situation to improve, for something to make life easier. This ‘something’ is often spoken of in terms of homeland, of Kurdistan. Ayşe has travelled around the whole country with her family just to end up in a *gecekondu* in Istanbul, and she sometimes wonders why they didn’t just stay where they were; life wasn’t all that much harder.

Haco explained that a free Kurdistan, a sovereign Kurdish state, was the only viable way of freeing the Kurds from the oppression by the Turks. It’s important, however, to keep in mind that Haco and his family came to Istanbul because life became too difficult in the Kurdish areas, and they consider Istanbul as their last chance to make a decent living. But life hasn’t become much easier for them: Haco sells vegetables from his lorry for a living. They don’t have any farmland, but other than that, their way of life doesn’t differ much from village life as I observed it in the Kurdish areas: they have electricity only occasionally, and they prepare their meals over open fire outdoors. They told me they would gladly return to the Kurdish areas if the living conditions there improved, to avoid having to manouver in Turkish dominated Istanbul.

The realist analysis of Serdar, who lives in the Kurdish region, leaves Kurdistan as something future, tingled with a hint of utopia. For Haco, living in an Istanbul *gecekondu*, it is what the fight is all about. And, as long as the political climate in Turkey is such that mentionings of Kurdistan are unacceptable,²⁷ this discrepancy of interpretation is largely unproblematic: Kurdistan as a symbol may well mean

²⁷ Even after the changes of legislation, Kurdish journalists state that there is a large degree of self-censorship, and the bar-association of Diyarbakır reports that their members are regularly tried on accusations of separatism. See: Recognition of linguistic rights? The impact of pro-EU reforms in Turkey: <http://www.khrp.org/publish/p2005/Recognition%20of%20Linguistic%20Rights%20FFM.pdf> (Reading date: 28.10.2006)

different things to differently situated Kurds, it may be “in our hearts” or on the urgent agenda, and still provide a sense of community and rootedness.

Rooted identity

Having a concept of a common homeland serves as a unifying symbol, as Olwig (2003) shows in her analysis of migrants from the Caribbean islands of St.Kitts and Nevis. While noting that the process of globalization contributes to levelling out regional differences, Olwig insists that “place is being celebrated as an increasingly important source of identification” (Olwig 2003:59). Places are made relevant through a notion that they have distinct and meaningful characteristics, an observation that seems valid for the situation of the Kurds in Istanbul: Due to the conditions in the Kurdish areas, the Kurds are increasingly spread over a large geographic area, many living far from the Kurdish South-East. Still, Kurdistan can be understood as the physical place in the world where the Kurdish identity is socially and culturally anchored. The importance of place does not diminish as the Kurds are spread. Rather, it takes on a new form, meeting their need for a common denominator, serving as physical evidence of a common past and destiny.

Olwigs Caribbean migrants envision a possible return to their motherland. If they all actually returned, there wouldn't be room for them, as scarcity of land made many leave in the first place. Still, the connection to their family land, for many a place they never have nor will set foot on, can acquire symbolic value as a cultural and social point of identification.

It symbolizes stability, continuity and rootedness in the Caribbean, because it is a concrete manifestation of their Caribbean origins where they, and their descendants, maintain a right to return as members of the family that owns the land whenever they wish to do so.

Olwig 2003:61

In addition to being politically potent, the concept of Kurdistan carries in it both a mythology of rootedness all the way back to the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia (Akman and Stoknes 2005), as well as a promise for a brighter future. It carries a promise of a common destiny of the Kurds as a group, an important element in constructions of national identity (Yuval-Davis 1997). As opposed to common roots, common destiny is oriented towards the future. In the case of Kurdistan as a symbol,

it holds a promise that commitment to the group's values will be awarded when the Kurds have their own homeland in which they can avoid oppression. This can be understood in line with Olwigs argument that the nation state, although an historical-cultural construction, has come to be a meaningful framework of life, territorially defined cultures being closely related to the global order of nation-states (Olwig 2003).

Separate peoples, separate territories

The ongoing conflicts and the hardships the people in the Kurdish region have lived through since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, as well as the continuous reification of the divisions between Kurds and Turks that are part of my informants everyday life in Istanbul, serve to strengthen the concept of the Turks as “the others”, as the oppressors. As shown, my Kurdish informants conceal their Kurdish identity when interacting with Turks. Although Kurds and Turks interact on a daily basis in Istanbul, this interaction is conducted without mutual knowledge and respect of each others' ethnic identity. This experience of potential stigma in meetings with the Turkish majority in Istanbul, and the lack of a platform of dialogue, strengthens the argument that a separate state, Kurdistan, is the only viable solution.

The south-eastern region suffers from poor infrastructure and weak economic growth. As McDowall (1997:8) notes, there is “a tension between the ‘imagined’ community of the Kurdish nation and the practical requirements of economic survival which persuade large numbers of Kurds to seek employment in Istanbul, Tehran and so forth”. In addition, what is referred to as Kurdistan is divided between Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, and there are few signs that these four states are willing to give up parts of their sovereign territory in order to give the Kurds a state of their own. The internal differences among the Kurds in these four countries, something rarely mentioned by my informants, add to the obstacles on the way to a sovereign Kurdish nation. Referring to Kurdistan as a common homeland is normally done without taking into consideration the how's and who's of the project.

Village life

Connected to Kurdistan as a symbol, is the symbol of village life in the south-eastern region as the authentic Kurdish way of life. When introducing the concept of ‘village life’ as a symbol of Kurdish identity and community, it's important to keep in mind

that what is presented here are the symbols of community used by the Kurds in Istanbul, not necessarily by all Kurds. For my informants, many of them feeling alien in the big city of Istanbul with its majority of Turks, life in the countryside in the Kurdish areas serves as a contrast. In a Kurdish theatre in Istanbul, this idea of the urban, modern Turk and the rural, uneducated Kurd was played out to much amusement for the audience, titled "*Mesela, ne kadar uzak?*" – "Like, how far?". The scene was a village in the Kurdish areas, where Turkish officials from Ankara, the Turkish capital, had arrived to make a census. The officials, a young man and a young woman, were neatly dressed – he in a suit and she in a skirt and blouse – while the Kurdish villagers, *köylü*, were in worn-out clothes: the men in worn shirts and caps, their mended trousers held up by suspenders to encircle their large stomachs, padded with cushions to get the right body shape. The women wore skirts sweeping the ground, blouses and traditional headscarves, half of them, too, with pillows on their stomachs to indicate that they were pregnant.

The officials impatiently tried to count the villagers, a job constantly challenged by some woman remembering that she had a couple of more children than mentioned, a man asking if they needed to count their animals, or someone interrupting to say that they had never heard anyone count that far. For each interruption the officials tried to explain that they were in a hurry, and that they had come far to conduct the census. This was always responded to by the village fool, asking "*Mesela, ne kadar uzak?*" – "Like, how far?", he had never left the village, and wondered how far it was possible to go.

Though made fun of in this self-ironic manner, the connection between Kurdish identity and village life was something I encountered on several occasions during my fieldwork in less explicit forms. When I arrived in Istanbul to start my fieldwork, most of the Kurds I spoke with were helpful. However, they all tried to make me go to the villages in the South-Eastern region. "That's where the real Kurds are", was the anthem, particularly if I mentioned that I wanted to get to know Kurdish women. "But you are Kurdish, aren't you?" I would ask. The answer always implied that yes, of course they were Kurds. But they didn't live like proper Kurds; they felt that their career or private lives were too close to the lives of the rest of the population in Istanbul for them to qualify as representatives of the Kurds as a group. They urged me to go find the real and authentic Kurds in the villages in the east.

Urban women

“We have become assimilated”, a woman explained to me, her friends nodding their heads. We were in her café in Taksim, having tea and talking about the conditions for Kurdish women in Istanbul and in general. This woman has been working for years in a human rights organisation focusing on the Kurdish question. She is herself Kurdish, and she now runs a café serving what’s labelled Kurdish dishes to a mainly Kurdish clientele. Still, her hair is cut short and modern, and dyed bright red. She wears no headscarf, and often wears trousers. As many other Kurdish women I met, her adaptation to life in the city in her own eyes disqualified her from being “a real Kurd”, from being a good representative for the Kurds. I had to go east to find the real ones, she said, before recommending one of the *gecekondu*-areas in Istanbul as a place to search for *real* Kurds if I insisted on staying in Istanbul. She and her well adjusted friends were not authentic enough to represent the Kurds.

The villages in the south-eastern region were presented as genuinely Kurdish, while the women I first met, who lived in the city and had full time jobs, spoke of themselves as assimilated. Expanding my field by entering the *gecekondu* areas, this feeling of not being genuinely Kurdish was never brought up: The women in the *gecekondu* rarely interact with Turks, it is mostly the men who handle the parts of life that are outside the closed Kurdish sphere. Klein (2001) observed this same conflict between having an urban lifestyle and being a genuine Kurdish woman in historical accounts of Kurdish nationalism from the beginning of the 20th century: The ‘uniqueness’ of The Kurdish women was used as a proof of the existence of the Kurds as a distinct nation, alongside other ‘proofs’ such as history, language and literature. Thus, the nationalists emphasised the importance of preserving the kurdishness of the women, and to “‘re-Kurdify’ those urban women who had ‘lost their original characteristics’ and ‘abandoned their nation’” (Klein 2001:36).

The gendered implications of this connection to village life were obvious: I never heard a Kurdish man describe himself as assimilated because he had adjusted to city life. Most of the men I spoke to were unemployed or had insecure jobs, struggling to make enough money to support their families. I had several discussions with men about which jobs paid the most and had the best social security system. Having a steady job was rated much higher than selling fruit and vegetables, the common way

of getting an income among Kurdish men. Having a steady job in the city was never connected with fear of not being a proper Kurd.

The men are still seen as responsible for providing for the women and children (White 1994). As a result, they *have to* be present in public spheres, and to interact with the Turkish majority. The women don't have to; for them it is, to a larger degree, considered a choice. The household structure in the Kurdish areas is mainly patrilocal, the patriarch having full authority. The women spend most of their time within their own community, without much contact with the outside world, and educating daughters is often considered a waste of money (Smits and Gündüz-Hoşgör 2003).

The ones who considered themselves assimilated were women with full-time jobs, wearing trousers and blouses, and speaking excellent Turkish. They had made their way in Turkish society, although the majority of them had jobs that matched their Kurdish identity, either in the Kurdish newspaper or in humanitarian or human rights organizations. It was these women who most often described themselves as assimilated: The *real Kurds*, particularly the women, were to be found in the villages, in traditional households, not as urban, working women.

Monopolizing modernity

Atatürk in 1923 stated that

the weakness of our society lies in our indifference to the status of women... They shall become educated in science and arts, they shall have the opportunity to attend any school and attain any level of education.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk 1923 cited in Smits and Gündüz-Hoşgör 2003:833

The Kemalist state feminism strongly encouraged women to educate themselves and pursue careers. My argument is that this has implications for the ways in which Kurdish women in Istanbul evaluate the different lifestyles provided for them in the city. The Kemalist process of nation-building in Turkey was centred around the concept of modernity (Ahmad 2003), and Atatürk particularly voiced the need for women's emancipation through education, participation in political life and work life. As Yuval-Davis argues, a proper understanding of 'gender' and 'nation' in specific, historical situations, is best achieved by analysing how gender and national identity is informed and constructed by each other (1997:21). Constructions of manhood and womanhood are crucial as symbolic border guards of the imagined community.

Women, by biologically and culturally being responsible for the children and thus the reproduction of the nation, are simultaneously border guards of culture and embodiments of it (Yuval-Davis 1997).

As I see it, the working women presenting themselves as assimilated are best understood in light of the close connection between female identity and the identity of the community as a whole: The ideal Turkish woman is, according to Kemalist ideology, an urban, educated woman. The antithesis to this is a rural, uneducated woman, living her life in the private sphere. When it comes to the life choices and career plans for women, the Turkish women were ascribed the label of modernity, and as I will elaborate in chapter seven, this affects the self-perception of Kurdish women who choose to work outside the home and not dress traditionally.

I argue that village life serves as a symbol of Kurdishness, distinctly different from the urban modernity of the Kemalist ideology. The women who spoke of themselves as assimilated were the ones who had some education and a job, who went to cafes in Taksim after work and to the hairdresser on Fridays. Yuval-Davis argues that women have been ignored in theories on nationalism, as these theories are based on a traditional dichotomy between private and public; Women are confined to the private sphere while political life traditionally is understood as situated in the public sphere. However, it is often women who are the ones responsible for conserving the authentic and distinct culture of the group through their everyday practice, and by giving birth to new members of the group (Yuval-Davis 1997). In order to be radically different, the ideal for Kurdish women is a romantic vision of the village life many of the Kurds in Istanbul have been forced to escape from.

Gathering around the dead

Part of what makes ethnic and national identities different from other group identities is the concept of common origin and common blood (Vermeulen and Govers 1994). In this part, I will describe the presence of dead people in the lives of those still living, and in which ways those who died for the cause serve as a symbol of community. Let me begin with an example:

In the big meeting room on the third floor of the Kurdish newspaper's building, the walls are filled with framed pictures of men of all ages. Most of the pictures are in black and white, some look like they are very old, while others are quite new. The quality of the photographs differs. Some look like they're taken by professional

photographers, others look as though they have been made on a photocopier or cut out from a newspaper.

The quality of the pictures is hardly the reason for letting them fill the walls of the meeting room. They have two things in common: the person shown is dead or has been missing for a long time, and they're all men. Under each picture is written a name, date of birth and of death or disappearance, and the place where it happened. Every time there is a big meeting in the newspaper, the faces of almost fifty dead or missing men look down from the walls of the room.

All the pictures in the newspaper's building were of men, as were most of the ones I saw in private homes. Only on two occasions did I see pictures of women: by the stage used by the theatre in the Kurdish culture centre in Taksim, and in the room where some children were learning about Kurdish culture and practicing theatre in the NGO offering work training. The pictures portrayed the same young Kurdish girl, who I was told had been killed by Turkish police on a bus in Istanbul.

The male presence in the newspaper's meeting room for making decisions and the young, innocent girl on the walls of the rooms meant for cultural activities, fits the general picture of the male as the political, the official and the one struggling for the group, while the woman is the innocent guardian of the groups *culture*. However, I argue that both play a different and significant role as symbols for the Kurdish community.

Dead body politics

Verdery (1999) states that dead bodies have often been part of political life all over the world. Part of what makes dead bodies useful as political symbols is the fact that they are material entities:

... unlike notions such as "patriotism" or "civil society," for instance, a corpse can be moved around, displayed, and strategically located in specific places. Bodies have the advantage of concreteness that nonetheless transcends time, making the past immediately present.

Verdery 1999:27

The corporality of the dead bodies makes them important means of localizing a claim. In the case of the Kurds, of localizing their claim to the region referred to as

Kurdistan. There is a connection between a person and the soil where the loved ones are buried and where the blood of a loved one was spilt (Verdery 1999).

Both Turks and Kurds relate to dead people, or rather images of them taken when they were alive, as symbols and markers of identity. The national father of Turkey Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, dead since 1938, is ever present through portraits, proverbs and statues – not to mention in the country's political discourse. Every classroom in Turkey has a picture of Atatürk on the walls, even the classrooms of the Kurdish language courses. Atatürk is presented as the embodiment and symbol of Turkish identity, of the values said to constitute the Turks as a people.

The Kurdish equivalent in Turkish society today, Abdullah Öcalan, isn't dead. He is in isolation as the only prisoner on Imrali Island. However, while his photograph is on all the Kurdish web-sites and was very much present at the 2005 Newroz celebration, it is not his image that hangs on the walls of Kurdish homes and organizations, it is pictures of the "anonymous and nameless dead" as Verdery (1999:20) calls them.²⁸

These dead people are not anonymous to their relatives and friends, but they are anonymous in the sense that they are ordinary people, not political leaders or army generals. Thus, the Kurds as a community perceive these dead people as yet other victims of the oppression they experience. This mass of dead people, the wall filled with pictures in the newspaper's building as one example, give faces to all those who "died for the cause" and thus inscribe the conflict in human bodies, the bodies of someone's father, brother, son or husband. The Kurdish webpages, like *Kurdishinfo.com*, have links to pages displaying pictures of those who recently have died or disappeared.²⁹ While together representing the human sacrifices of the Turkish oppression, each dead body, individually, has close blood relations to their families and relatives, and the people from their village and perhaps even surrounding villages know them and their biographies.

²⁸ While Peteet (1997) describes how Palestinians commonly refer to those who have died for the national cause as martyrs, I only heard this expression used once, during an interview with the organization *Bariş Anneleri*, Peace Mothers, in Diyarbakır. The term '*savaş kurbanları*', sacrifices or victims of the war, was more common when describing those who had died for the cause.

²⁹ See "Civilian Victims of the War"

http://www.kurdishinfo.com/userimages/vahset/Civilian_victims_of_the_war.html (Reading date: 31.10.2006)

The presence of death

Those who died are present in more ways than their photographs. Through an evening with Zeyneb and Devrim, I will show different ways in which those dead or missing are made relevant in the lives of those still living.

After a Friday in the NGO offering work-training, I went with Zeyneb, Devrim and Devrim's brother Ahmet to a political meeting. It was a celebration in a local branch of Dehap, the Kurdish political party, and they were going there with their families. We went by bus, meeting the family inside the decorated, crowded room. I recognised faces from the MKM and from the NGO, one of the men organizing the celebration had volunteered there for a while, after being released from prison serving a sentence for pro-Kurdish political activity. The room was decorated in red, yellow and green, the colours of Kurdistan, and there were huge pictures on the walls of landscapes and famous buildings from the Kurdish areas. There were speeches, and bands playing both traditional Kurdish music and rock music. The posters on the walls said *Savaşa Hayır*, No to War and *Barış Hemen Şimdi*, Peace Now. Asking for short summaries of the different speeches held during the evening (with all the noise in the room I was unable to understand them), Zeyneb and Devrim told me that they were mainly about all the young people who had died or disappeared due to the ongoing conflict.

"We came here for the dancing," Zeyneb said after the speeches, grabbing my hand. The dance floor was crowded with men and women, boys and girls, all holding each others little fingers forming circles and moving to the music.

At one point of the evening a young woman pulled me into the back staircase and asked me who I was and what I was doing there. I explained to her why I was there, and she told me I should go to Syria, into the mountains, to meet up with the PKK. She was dressed in trousers and a khaki shirt, and talked vigorously about the harsh living conditions for Kurdish women.

Devrim came running to get me, she obviously didn't find the young woman proper company: "She's political," Devrim whispered to me before telling her that we had to leave. I let myself be dragged back into the dancing crowd in the main hall. "We support Dehap, but we're not political," Devrim said, and repeated Zeyneb's statement that they were here for the music and dance.

This combined meeting and party of the local Dehap was perceived as mainly political by participants like the khaki-clad woman, while my friends were there to enjoy themselves. They wanted music, dancing and the opportunity to escape their regular evenings at home with their families. They did not make a big deal about the fact that the evening was organised by Dehap, the Kurdish political party at that time. They were, as Devrim said, ‘not political’. They *did* make a big deal out of the Kurdish quality of the event, and the traditional dances were the ones they had been practicing during afternoons in Başak, parts of the Kurdish folklore.

Leaving the party we got a ride on the back of a small lorry, sitting on the floor looking out at the dark sky. Ahmet, Devrim’s brother, sang songs from their family’s village in Siirt, in the Kurdish areas. Arriving at the house of Zeyneb’s parents, we went to her room, where we spent the night. She had three pictures on her bedside table: her grandfather who had been killed, an older brother who had disappeared years earlier, and her younger brother who was doing his military service. She spoke warmly of them all, letting me understand that they believed her older brother had been captured or killed by Turkish soldiers. She feared that her younger brother, doing his military service in the south-eastern areas, might get hurt or killed. Simultaneously fearing he might be forced to fight against ‘their own people’.

People who have already been killed as well as the fear of more people dying was present in all the different parts of the evening. It is present in the official part of the program through speeches made from the stage, it is present in the young woman urging me to visit the guerrilla, and it is present in the personal stories told by Zeyneb about loss and fear of loosing again. In the speeches, they are used to legitimise the political claims for linguistic and cultural freedom as they are forwarded by Dehap. The Guerilla in Syria are representatives of the ones putting their lives on the line today, while Zeyneb’s sadness and fear is one example of the personal relations many Kurds have with someone who has been killed.

Private and political

Drawing attention to the nameless dead works to reify and reposition social categories. Those who died for the cause, by being gathered as a symbol and through their direct connections with those still living, underlines both the myth of common descent and blood, and that of common destiny (Verdery 1999). The dead body politics insert this revaluation directly into the lives of persons, families and small

groups. It is all those who were never famous or well known, but who somehow died for the cause of the Kurdish people.

Verdery (1999) defines politics as a realm of continual struggle over meanings, or signification, dead bodies being a good vehicle for doing so. The dead people politics may not be the explicit reason for keeping a framed picture on the wall of someone close to you who has been killed. However, their presence in my view serves to tie the private loss to the larger context of interethnic conflict: while the pictures may be hung as a memory of a loved one, their presence is a constant reminder of what has been sacrificed, and, therefore, of what is at stake.

Rather than seeing nationalism as a matter of territorial borders and state-making, Verdery (1999:26) suggests seeing it as a “part of kinship, spirits ancestor worship, and the circulation of cultural treasures”. The symbolism of dead bodies brings the macro-level of the Kurdish struggle against Turkish oppression into the close, personal relations between family members. This in turn strengthens the legitimacy of the Kurdish community as the primary community for individual Kurds.

Symbolizing common blood and destiny

Verdery’s argument about the efficacy of dead bodies as symbols, resembles that of Cohen (1985): A dead body is meaningful not in itself, but through the way a specific dead person’s importance is constructed. Hanging pictures of those who have been killed within the context of the struggle between the Kurds and the Turks on the walls, serves to legitimise the struggle: if all these people sacrificed their lives for the cause, it must be worth fighting for. Those who die remind those still living that they have an obligation to continue where those who died were cut off.

The dead bodies are open to different readings by differently situated actors: “... among the most important properties of bodies, especially dead ones, is their ambiguity, multivocality, or polysemy. Remains are concrete, yet protean” (Verdery 1999:28). The dead bodies suggest the lived lives of complex human beings, and can therefore be evaluated from various angles and assigned different meanings and purposes. And while living human beings would often object to this kind of treatment, the dead bodies have the useful habit of keeping quiet. The fact that the dead bodies of the Kurds are regular people, make them easy to identify with – the men on the walls of the newspaper’s building could be anyone’s father, brother son or husband,

the same familiar quality goes for the young people lost or killed that were spoken of at the Dehap-meeting.

Different people can invoke corpses as symbols, thinking those corpses mean the same thing to all present, whereas in fact they may mean different things to each. All that is shared is everyone's *recognition* that this dead person as somehow important.

Verdery 1999:29

The fact that dead bodies don't talk on their own makes it possible to put words into their mouths, to assign them a part in a political struggle. However, they have only been *one* person, and thus easily present the illusion of having only one significance.

Those who died for the cause evokes a sense of commitment to the common struggle of the Kurds: a struggle for the freedom to express Kurdish identity. I will now move on to see how this concept of freedom works as a symbol for Kurdish unity.

Our freedom

"*Özgürlüğümüz istiyoruz*", we want our freedom, said Haco, during our regular after-dinner tea, trying again to answer my questions of what it was they really wanted. As said Zeyneb, after singing a Kurdish song in the NGO, practicing for the celebration marking the end of their course. As did Gülhan, working after hours for almost no pay in the Kurdish newspaper, and Mehmet, working for the right to speak his mother tongue, Kurmanji. Almost all my informants included the term '*özgürlüğümüz*', our freedom, when talking about the future and explaining what the Kurdish struggle was all about.

As I asked in the introduction: How is this 'we' perceived and constructed, and what does 'freedom' imply? By the term 'freedom' my informants expressed a hope that their common destiny would be brighter than their past, and as such, freedom appeared as a symbol of their community including both a common history of oppression and a common destiny. Achieving 'our freedom' meant achieving freedom for Kurds to speak Kurdish languages, and freedom from oppression of their Kurdish identity, ending the armed struggle causing so many deaths.

Contested freedom

Trying to explain what this freedom was to consist of, most had difficulties. For some, like Haco, a free Kurdistan was the only answer. Others, like Serdar, wanted a confederation with a Kurdish self-governed area inside the borders of Turkey, while others again would gladly stay part of Turkey if only they were allowed to “live as Kurds”, perceiving cultural and linguistic rights as ‘freedom’ enough. The woman running the small café in Taksim was of this opinion.

However, all these interpretations of the term ‘freedom’ coexisted among my informants in Istanbul, seemingly without threatening the sense of belonging to the same ethnic group and pulling, largely, in the same direction. ‘Our freedom’ is presented as applying equally to all Kurds, what is seen to be at stake is the freedom of the Kurds as a *group*, as a nation. This was underlined by my informants consistent use of the term *özgürlüğümüz*; our freedom, as opposed to *özgürlüğüm*; my freedom, or just *özgürlük*; freedom.

Our freedom, our oppressor?

The different interpretations of what this freedom is to consist of have one common denominator: they are directed towards the Turks, a common oppressor of the Kurds as a people. But, as I have shown, the members of the Kurdish community are simultaneously situated on axes of power connected to other social divisions than the ethnic. Some are disempowered because of lack of education, some because they don’t speak the dominant language, some because they don’t control their own money. Some women are confined to staying at home, largely due to male dominance in the public sphere. Does the concept of our freedom apply to these internal power differences, or does commitment to the common struggle for our freedom obscure the internal power differences among the Kurdish population?

The dual action of symbols

The five symbols described above, (1) language, (2) Kurdistan, (3) village life, (4) the symbolism of dead bodies, and (5) the concept of ‘our freedom’ are used by all my Kurdish informants in Istanbul in various ways. They may be understood as key symbols, as I was told by my informants that they are culturally important, they aroused emotions both inside and outside the Kurdish community, and they came up in different contexts (Ortner 1973). Such key symbols can be “things and abstractions,

nouns and verbs, single items and whole events” (Ortner 1973:1339). Symbols make it easier to understand complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas; they make the complexities of society understandable, and enable people to communicate these complexities to others.

As I have shown, these symbols don’t necessarily mean the same to all those within the group who adhere to them, nor to people on the outside (Cohen 1985). Cohen suggests looking at the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ constructed by the symbols of group identity as a way of examining the nature of a community, with reference to Barth’s concept of ethnic boundaries (Barth 1969). Boundaries marking the end of community encapsulate the identity of the community, and become relevant in meetings with other communities.

This multivocal quality of symbols is part of what makes symbols create a sense of belonging and sameness: “Symbols do not so much express meaning as give us the capacity to make meaning” (Cohen 1985:14). As the interpretations made by individual members of community rarely match completely, trying to define precisely what a symbol of community means will in most cases reveal differences between the members of society that remain concealed as long as the symbol remains undefined and multivocal. Not insisting on clear definitions of the content of the symbols, enables members of the group to relate to the symbols of community, and through them achieve a feeling of belonging together.

Power over symbols

While the *meaning* of the symbol varies according to each individual’s unique orientation to it (Cohen 1985), so does the possibility of the individual members of the community to define which symbols are ‘key symbols’ and how their community should be translated into daily life and political strategies:

In the face of this variability of meaning, the consciousness of community has to be kept alive through manipulation of its symbols. The reality and efficacy of the community’s boundary – and, therefore, of the community itself – depends upon its symbolic construction and embellishment.

Cohen 1985:15

In this perspective, the symbols uniting a community, particularly ethnic and national collectives, can have the effect of creating a sense of unity between those with power

and those without, through the metaphors of kinship and unity (Yanagisako & Delaney 1995). The symbols of sameness and belonging may obscure and naturalise the differences and power struggles within the group, leaving women, children, young, old, urban and rural as presumably equal members of the community (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995, Yuval-Davis 1997).

This tendency to obscure internal power differences is strengthened by the fact that community is where one “acquires ‘culture’”, the symbols which will equip one for the social (Cohen 1985:15). The members of a community have, or believe they have, the same sense of the world, because they share the symbols through which to make sense: The reality of the Kurdish community in the minds and lives of individual Kurds, is inherent in their attachment or commitment to the symbols of community (Cohen 1985). Symbols like ‘those who died for the cause’ create a sense of commitment to the common goals of the Kurds in the empowered and disempowered members alike: the difference is who gets to decide what these common goals are.

7

Internalizing the conflict

The symbols of Kurdish identity, as described and analyzed in the previous chapters, play a part in my informants' *production of ethnicity for themselves* (Cohen 1994:76). While the previous chapter focused on how these symbols contributed to a sense of sameness and commitment to the Kurdish community, I will now turn to how the boundaries of Kurdish identity are internalized and interpreted in the lives of two of my informants: Ayşe in the *gecekondu*, and Aynur, considering the big questions in life. How do they handle being born into an oppressed ethnic group with nationalist aspirations? How does this affect their everyday lives, and their experience of being in control of their own lives? I let some of Ayşe's reflections introduce the subject.

"Just to live a normal life"

"Sometimes I look at the girls I pass in the streets, the Turkish girls. They seem to have easy lives, they go to school," Ayşe says, avoiding a hole in the road and turning left down a yellow, dusty road leading out of the *gecekondu* area. Walking to the grocer to buy yoghurt and rice is one of her only chances to get out of the crowded house on her own these days, so walking in the harsh sun doesn't bother her. She pauses, looking at the people and cars in the streets. "Sometimes I wish I could forget everything about being Kurdish, just to live a normal life. They have so many opportunities, I haven't even gone to school," she says. Today we have coupons to get

bread from a public service. Ayşe is embarrassed about having to use the coupons; she says they're not really that poor.

She is twenty years old, and the only unmarried daughter in a Kurdish migrant family living in a poor area of Istanbul. When we first met she did not hesitate to present herself as Kurdish. These thoughts about forgetting her Kurdishness were not so readily accessible, and were only mentioned when her family was not there.

Ayşe's situation can be understood as a result of her positioning on a set of intersecting power grids. The fact that she never went to school can't be ascribed solely to her being Kurdish: her family's economic needs for her hands in labour, and their history of migration, are equally important. Her elder brothers have attended primary school, they are literate, and they have more or less steady jobs: thus, the gender aspect is among the relevant factors when trying to find the reasons why Ayşe has ended up uneducated and unemployed in an Istanbul *gecekondu*. Her own explanation is that *being Kurdish* has deprived her of opportunities that the Turkish girls she sees in her neighbourhood have had. In Ayşe's interpretation of her own situation, the ethnic division between Kurds and Turks is the relevant social division in society and the source of oppression. By being born into a particular group in a particular time, Ayşe has become part of a political struggle that has come to have an impact on most parts of her everyday life as well as the way she perceives herself. As showed in chapter four, she rarely interacts with members of the Turkish majority population of Istanbul; she spends most of her time in 'closed Kurdish spheres', and it is from this position she interprets her situation.

Ayşe's explanation implies that if only she wasn't Kurdish, everything would have been different. This is, to some extent, true: the conflict between the Kurds and the Turks has an important and limiting impact on the lives of all my informants. But being Kurdish is not limiting in the same way or to the same degree for my differently situated informants: For Mehmet, being a student in a prestigious University, his Kurdish identity has an impact on his academic interests and on how he presents himself in different contexts, and how free he is to express his Kurdish identity varies according to the surroundings. He resents having to speak Turkish, as he considers Kurmanji his mother tongue. However, his being Kurdish does not get in the way of his education or interaction with the Turkish part of the city's population.

Significant identities

The ongoing conflict between Kurds and Turks, along with the oppression and the stigma experienced by Ayşe in her everyday life, serve to emphasise her ethnic identity as the main reason for her situation, and she sees few realistic strategies for improving it. Simultaneously, the focus on the ethnic division contributes to obscuring the impact of factors like gender, economic status and the fact that she and her family have migrated from a rural to an urban environment. These factors are not made relevant in her own interpretations of her situation.

In chapter four, I described how Ayşe's strategy for handling interaction with Turks largely consisted of retreating to closed Kurdish spheres. However, the closed Kurdish sphere of the NGO offering work training, also made her feel uncomfortable. She was ambivalent about the project; Sometimes she said it was nice to get out of the house, while at other times she said she felt *rahatsız*, uncomfortable, being there, particularly when the issue of money came up. While most of the participants to the course went to a small café for *börek*, a filled pastry, and tea in the lunch break, Ayşe had brought her own food, and stayed in the premises of the NGO with a couple of other girls who also didn't have money for lunch. The economic situation of her family was obviously more dire than what was the case for many of the other young people in the course, and this made her feel uncomfortable. Sometimes she brought money for lunch, and went with the other girls to the café. But while the other girls chose *börek*'s filled with minced meat or vegetables, Ayşe always asked for the cheapest one, with a little bit of white cheese as the only filling. The other girls commented that her *börek* was tasteless. Ayşe told me she was the only one in the course from a *gecekondu*; the families of the other participants had apartments. In this context, among other Kurds, the economic axes became relevant.

Layered oppressions

Why are other factors than ethnic belonging undercommunicated in Ayşe's analysis of her own situation? MacLeod (1992:553) argues that "[f]acing a layered and overlapping round of oppressors, women do not have the relative luxury of knowing their enemies". The power that restrains Ayşe's life is multilayered; it can be identified in the close relations of the family, as well as in the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state, linked to the global system of nation-states. This perspective makes Ayşe's interpretation of the situation easier to comprehend, as she

is situated in the intersection of several power grids: Her male relatives decide when she can go out by controlling the family's money, independent of who *earned* the money. Ayşe has had jobs, but her salary went to her brothers. They in turn give her money to go to the grocer for food, but not enough to allow her to travel by bus to other parts of town, or to buy the clothes or the cell-phone she wants. However, it is not only Ayşe who can't get the things she wants: her brothers don't have much money to distribute, as the family as a collective is poor.

Within the context of the almost century long struggle between the Kurds as an ethnic minority and the Turkish state, Ayşe's strategy for handling the potential stigma connected to interaction with members of the Turkish majority, contributes to tying her to the closed Kurdish sphere. In her case, this sphere largely consists of her home and the home of relatives living nearby, making it difficult to oppose the power structures of the family. These different factors are, as I have shown, all part of the explanation why Ayşe is a poor, unemployed young woman living in an Istanbul *gecekondu*. However, as MacLeod (1992) points out, some of her oppressors are closer to her than others: her brothers, while contributing to her lack of control over her own life, simultaneously are the ones offering her what little security she has both economically and socially: The salary of the jobs she has had, and their contemporary quality, wouldn't have enabled her to create a life of her own away from the patriarchal structure of the family. In addition to the economic security offered by her family, it is the only real network she has in the city: again, her seclusion from the outside world, largely a result of her oppressed situation, contributes to tying her even closer to the closed Kurdish sphere of her home.

These different power grids intersect in Ayşe's situation, they are mutually co-constitutive of each other, and they cannot be understood separately: the oppression of her Kurdish identity wouldn't have had the same effect if her economic status or the gender relations in her family were different. Removing one of the power grids intersecting in her life, would change the other ones profoundly: Had she been wealthier, her brothers' power would have had to work on a different level.

Layered oppressions, layered resistance?

If Ayşe's situation can be understood as a result of her positioning on several power grids, the possibilities of resisting her oppressors should also be multiple. However, Ayşe's interpretation of the situation highlights the ethnic division in the Turkish

society, and her Kurdish identity as the main reason for her situation, leaving the Turkish state as the oppressor to be resisted.

Within the context of the Turkish nation-state, the symbols of Kurdish community as they were displayed among my informants in Istanbul, contribute to obscure internal power differences and the different individual social positionings. They invoke feelings of belonging and commitment, and as long as individual members of the Kurdish community interpret their own experience of oppression in terms of the ongoing conflict between the two groups, as Ayşe's story illustrates, their ethnic identity is given primacy over other social divisions. Thus resistance is likely to be directed towards the Turkish oppressors, not towards the men in the family or the gossiping women in the neighbourhood.

As Ayşe interprets her situation, to "forget everything about being Kurdish" would allow her to lead "a normal life". In this statement, all the other forms of oppression she is subject to are subsumed by the oppression of the Kurds by the Turks. This dichotomous understanding of her situation is part of what gives legitimacy to the common cause, 'our freedom': If only the Turkish oppression of the Kurds would come to an end, life would become easier.

These intermeshed powergrids, some close and familiar, others on a macropolitical level, contribute to making Ayşe's wish to "forget all about being Kurdish" an unrealistic option for her. As described earlier, there are several Kurds living in Istanbul who don't communicate their Kurdish identity, they keep it as a secret and live as Turks. This choice is difficult for Ayşe to make; she can't wake up in the morning and decide not to be Kurdish, and according to her history of poverty and migration, this opportunity hasn't been present at earlier stages in her life: Her family identify themselves as Kurds, she has been raised as a Kurd, and she has always considered herself so. Her economic status, her gender, her lack of education and her lack of network in the city all contribute to make her Kurdish identity something she can't choose not to include in her self-presentation and self-perception.

People as power – the importance of staying Kurdish

The most common way of entering a national or ethnic community is by being born into it, and as such it is women who by their bodies biologically reproduce the nation. There are three main ways of evaluating procreation within national discourse: one may wish to maintain the purity of blood and genes, through an eugenic discourse

concerned with the quality of the nation; one may wish to decrease the population growth in order to avoid problems in connection with overpopulation, observed in several third-world countries; or, one may regard people as power in the sense that the future of the nation depends on its continuous growth (Yuval-Davis 1997:29-31).

The Turkish government until recently didn't acknowledge the existence of the Kurds as a group, and whether or not they are an *ethnic* group is still contested (Benhabib and Isiksel 2006). In literature on the Kurds, their number is often underlined, or they are referred to as the largest ethnic group in the region without their own state (e.g. Mojab 2001:1, McDowall 1997:3, Barkley and Fuller 1998:xi); According to this logic, the more Kurds, the more right to be acknowledged. This logic is present in one of my informant's view of the situation: "They came here and told us to have fewer children, they said it was for our health, and to improve our economy," Haco told me. We sat outside their shack in the *gecekodu*, sipping tea and watching his own and his younger brother's wife collect the children and getting them ready for bed. "They told us to have fewer children, but they'll get nowhere. I already have five children, my mother had thirteen". He gives the his mother a glance, smiling at her. She is only in her late fifties, but a life of hard work and continuous migration has aged her face, and bent her back. "They" are representatives of the Turkish government, on a mission to teach poor citizens about family planning. This family understood the request as a part of the oppression of them by the Turks. My impression is that the Kurds in Istanbul see 'people as power', in the sense that they see a growing population as a path to legitimising their claims.

The 'undercover kurds' described in chapter four, pose another challenge in the quest for a large, powerful population: They have chosen not to make their ethnic origin relevant in their lives, and thus don't feel committed to the common goals of the Kurdish community. In contrast, my informants quite often voiced their fears of blending in with the Turkish majority. They valued the parts of their lives that they find particular for Kurds, like their language and the women's clothing. Raising their children as Kurds was emphasised, and speaking a Kurdish language was seen as more important for the children than learning Turkish.

One evening in Ayşe's household, just after the celebration of Newroz and Abdullah Öcalan's statement that he regarded a confederate solution the only viable solution for the Kurds, we were having tea and relaxing after the evening meal. The women were all in the kitchen cleaning up, the children had gone to bed. The oldest

son in the house told me about what he called *bar kürtler*; bar-Kurds. He spoke condescendingly about Kurds sitting in bars and cafés in Taksim, the social and cultural centre of Istanbul. They were not taking part in the fight for the freedom of the Kurds, and not even admitting their Kurdish heritage to their surroundings, a description fitting Ayan and Can in chapter four, who never mentioned their Kurdish heritage in public. Haco described the bar-Kurds as successful in the majority society, but without a sense of responsibility towards the group they were members of: They did not use their relatively high position in society in order to improve the situation of the rest of the Kurdish population in Turkey in any way, something that this young Kurd described as something of a betrayal: They got opportunities that weren't open to most Kurds, he explained, by pretending not to be Kurdish, although they really were. In his opinion, they did not do the right thing; they did not take part in the fight for freedom for the Kurdish people.

This kind of moral judgement of the actions of other Kurds was often made. Haco used the common goal, *our freedom* in order to evaluate the actions of other Kurds. Are they pulling in the right direction or not? In the case of the bar-Kurds, the answer was no. By keeping their Kurdish identity hidden and pursuing personal goals, their actions were seen as not promoting the situation of the Kurds as a group.

The moral judgements passed by Ayşes older brother Haco, implies that one needs to feel commitment towards the Kurdish struggle in order to be a real member of the Kurdish community. Pragmatic and somehow self-serving actions like those of the bar-Kurds, don't qualify. This commitment is commonly articulated through the term 'özgürlüğümüz', our freedom. Being part of the fight for freedom, as my informants referred to it, meant putting something at stake for the sake of the rest of the community – symbolised in Kurdish organisations and households through the pictures of those who died for the cause.

In its explicit use, *özgürlüğümüz* always referred to the freedom of *the group*, not the freedom of individual members of the group. Implicitly, as expressed by the condescending attitude towards the bar-Kurds, the freedom for individuals to live fulfilling lives would come *after* the Kurds as a people were free. Thus, the concept of *our freedom* may, paradoxically, limit the freedom of choice of individual members of the community of Kurds. Even the term 'freedom' can serve to obscure power structures and differences of interests within a group.

I will now turn to Aynur's reflections about getting an education and pursuing a career, while struggling to 'stay Kurdish' to investigate how the importance of staying Kurdish in order to do one's share in the struggle for "our freedom", is internalised in individual Kurds and used as a normative standard when making choices and plans for the future.

Making the right choices

Aynur is 18 years old, and in high school. Her family is from the city of Diyarbakır, and she has lived in Istanbul since her family moved there when she was a little girl. After we met celebrating Newroz in Zeytinburnu, she sometimes came to meet me, and we went to cafés or just for a walk by the Bosphorus watching people fish or having a picnic. During our walks, she often talked about the oppression of the Kurds in Turkey, she had stories from her own relatives' experiences, and from her father, who used to be a politician in Dehap. Her own dream of the future is to be accepted into the Textile department in one of Turkey's top universities. All her life she has been drawing pictures of all kinds of extravagant creations – mostly women in spectacular dresses, with jewellery, high heels and flowing hair, and her biggest wish is to become a fashion designer. Her story is one of a young girl having to make choices, and fearing the results.

Being accepted into university is very difficult. When telling me about her dreams, and the obstacles she must overcome to achieve them, Aynur often mentioned fear of being assimilated. She once explained her ambivalent feelings about going to school, an ambivalence strongly tied to the stories of oppression she had been told since childhood.

"Do you think going to school makes me more assimilated? More Turkish?" she asked me. To have the possibility to pursue the education she dreams of after finishing high-school, she needs to do well in school. But doing well in school conflicts with her Kurdish identity: "In history lessons, they teach us a history of Turkey that I don't recognise", she said, explaining that the lives of the Kurds in Turkey were nowhere to be found in the history books. Giving the "correct" replies to the teacher's questions felt like a betrayal, she said: Her father used to be active in the Kurdish political party Dehap, and she knows about the hardships experienced by Kurds in the short history of the Turkish republic.

Her wish to do well in school in order to pursue her own goals, conflicts with her interpretation of what's fair. Not to protest what is taught feels like a betrayal, while protesting would make her plans for the future difficult to achieve. She doesn't really see any alternatives to attending school and doing well. Her father works night shifts in a factory, her mother works long hours washing dishes in a restaurant. That's not the life Aynur wants, and she knows that getting a good education is the only chance of avoiding it.

Aynur's use of the term 'assimilated' deserves some attention, as she used it on several occasions, relating to different subjects: When talking about a Turkish boy she had a crush on in school, when talking about what she and her friends did in their spare time, and when considering pros and cons about living in Istanbul as opposed to living in the Kurdish areas.

She was the only Kurdish girl in her school, and many of her daily dilemmas circled around where to look for guidance in choosing what kind of clothing was most appropriate, and identifying which areas of town were safe: The potential stigma of her Kurdish identity was coupled with a lack of role models. Aynur dressed in jeans and blouses, and wore discreet jewellery. Her reflections about proper clothing revealed an ambivalence and insecurity: she spoke of the traditional Kurdish clothing as consisting of long skirts, long-sleeved blouses and head scarves, the kind of clothing her mother wore. Aynur didn't dress like that – as her career plans imply, she was quite interested in fashion and clothing, and wanted to wear the clothes that she liked. However, when talking about her career plans as a fashion designer, she said that she wanted to use elements of the traditional clothing of the Kurds in her future creations. "I want to show my culture in a positive way," she said.

In all of these different aspects of her life, Aynur was considering what was the right thing to do with reference to the danger of becoming assimilated, of not *being Kurdish enough*. She saw her own choices and actions as ways of strengthening or weakening her own Kurdish identity, and evaluated different alternatives according to their possible effect on her identity as a Kurd.

While ethnicity may have a definite appearance, it often has an indefinite substance (Cohen 1985:62). Thus Aynur is, in Bourdieu's words, "endlessly occupied in the negotiation of their own identity" (Bourdieu 1989:21). How can she best stay Kurdish while pursuing her dreams?

As I have argued earlier, the rural women in the Kurdiḥ areas are the ones referred to as the *real Kurds*, and it seems as if Aynur, living in the Turkish dominated city of Istanbul, surrounded by people who are not Kurds, has some kind of “ideal Kurd” in mind when making choices in her everyday life. Although she goes to high-school and plans to go to university, she constantly evaluates her personal goals for the future and ways of getting there through the concept of assimilation. Aynur considers herself and her family Kurdish, and feels a responsibility towards all those who don’t have the opportunities she has for getting an education and pursuing their dreams. At the same time, making that choice to pursue her own dreams is at many points in conflict with her perception of responsibility for her own background. Aynur considers herself and her family Kurdish, and feels a responsibility towards all those who don’t have the opportunities she has of getting an education and pursuing their dreams.

The individual boundaries of Kurdish identity

Ayşe and Aynur are both young, Kurdish women in Istanbul. However, their experiences of being Kurdish in everyday life differs. What they have in common is that their Kurdish identity is made relevant in the ways they perceive their position and opportunities in society. Ayşe’s interpretation of her lack of freedom, and Aynur’s difficulties when choosing the direction of her life, are both informed by their consciousness of the boundaries of their Kurdish identity, and their knowledge of and experience with the oppression of Kurdish identity in Turkey.

Kurdish identity in Istanbul is, as discussed, expressed through multivocal symbols making room for individual interpretations and internal divergence. For my Kurdish informants in Istanbul, there is no such thing as an uncontested Kurdish culture, equally distributed and equally interpreted among all members of a clearly defined Kurdish community. My differently situated informants interpret the symbols of Kurdish society differently, and the ways in which these symbolic representations influence their lives, are not the same. However, not all members of society have the same power of definition, nor the same freedom to choose their memberships. In the self-consciousness of individual Kurds, the insubstantial identity of the collectivity of Kurds becomes substantial, as it is informed by the experiences of everyday life, and by the positive or negative sanctioning of and from other members of the Kurdish society (Cohen 1994:62).

What emerges from the two examples above, is that power of the symbols of Kurdish identity is indeed a form of *symbolic power*. A mild, often invisible power built into the relation between the dominant and the dominated (Bourdieu 2000). Aynur's ambivalence towards the choices she has to make, and her efforts to *be Kurdish* in the things she does and the choices she makes, can be understood as an internalisation of the demand to be authentic and distinctly different, in order to achieve legitimacy of the Kurds as a group distinctly different from the Turkish majority. Benhabib argues that

the demarcations of cultures and of the human groups that are their carriers are extremely contested, fragile as well as delicate. To possess the culture means to be an insider. Not to be acculturated in the appropriate way is to be an outsider. Hence the boundaries are always securely guarded, their narratives purified, their rituals carefully monitored. These boundaries circumscribe power in that they legitimize its use within the group.

Benhabib 2002:7

The guarding of these boundaries is not necessarily done by someone in power explicitly dictating the *dos* and *don'ts* of the members of the community in question. Aynur's ambivalence and fears of assimilation, her internal struggles, can be understood as conflicts between her dreams and possibilities in the big city of Istanbul, and her Kurdish identity, internalised through the symbols of what being a 'real' Kurd is all about. She sees opportunities for improving her position and pursuing a career, but her sense of responsibility towards the Kurdish community, which is an integral part of her self-consciousness, turns the project of pursuing her dreams into a constant negotiation of her own identity, to make sure she doesn't cross the boundary of 'being a good Kurd' (Bourdieu 1989).

8

Concluding remarks

The outset of this dissertation was a question: How do young Kurds experience life in Turkey's largest city Istanbul? My attempt to give an answer to this question has led through the creation of Turkey and the emergence of Kurdish nationalism, to descriptions of the everyday lives of the Kurds I got to know in Istanbul. This is, in a sense, descriptions of everyday lives within the context of an armed conflict. I have described ways in which ethnic identity and ethnic boundaries are articulated, and have an impact on, the lives of my informants.

My informants live in Istanbul, quite a distance from the south-eastern region, where the armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish government has been centred. But the conflict, along with the history of oppression of Kurdish identity, is to a large degree what defines the relationship between Kurds and Turks in Istanbul: As discussed, the Kurds in Istanbul rarely communicate their ethnic identity outside the closed Kurdish spheres, in an effort to avoid the potential stigma connected with belonging to an ethnic minority that threatens the "indivisible unity" of Turkey. We have seen how this retreat of Kurdish cultural expressions may to the outsider render invisible the stigma as well as the group itself.

As I hope to have shown through the previous chapters, there is no simple answer to the question of how young Kurds experience life in Istanbul. Ayşe, Zeyneb, Devrim, Gülhan, Özlem, Aynur and Mehmet lead different lives in Istanbul, despite

their sense of belonging to the Kurdish community: The Kurdish aspect of their identity is made relevant in their lives in different ways, and the degree to which being Kurdish is seen to limit them in their everyday lives differ.

The efforts made in order to stay Kurdish in the Turkish dominated city of Istanbul underlines the constructed quality of ethnic identity. Boundaries can be understood as zones for reflection on who one is and who others are (Cohen 1994:74), and the constant interaction with the Turkish majority invokes reflection upon what it means to be Kurdish.

Belonging is about emotional attachment, about ‘feeling home’ and about feeling safe (Yuval-Davis et. al. 2006:2). The emotional attachment to the community of Kurds is strengthened by the symbols commonly used by Kurds to communicate their ethnic identity. As shown, speaking of Kurdistan as the homeland of the Kurds, remembering those who died in the conflict between Kurds and Turks, and the different ways of contributing to the common struggle for freedom from oppression, all contribute to a sense of belonging.

However, the Kurds need to be different from the Turkish majority in order to be perceived as a group. Speaking or speaking *of* the Kurdish languages contributes to legitimizing the claim to be distinctly different by constructing an ‘imagined mother tongue’, as do the references to ‘village life’ as the authentic life of the Kurds. Given the role of women as carriers and reproducers of culture (Yuval-Davis 1997), this reflection over how to be a ‘good Kurd’ was most clearly articulated by women who lived at least parts of their lives outside the closed Kurdish spheres: The well integrated women in Taksim considered themselves assimilated, while Aynur constantly considers how her actions and choices may influence her kurdishness.

Bourdieu (1989) argues that the social world may be uttered and constructed in different ways, and that this is done according to different principles of *vision* and *division*: ethnicity is one such social division, gender, age, and level of education and economic status are others. As has been discussed throughout this dissertation, my informants are differently situated on the grids of power connected to these social divisions. Yuval-Davis (1997:67) argues that in order not to let the sense of belonging to a community obscure the internal power differences, it is necessary to resist the ‘culturization’, what she describes as a colonisation of the social by the cultural. This culturization contributes to rendering the multiplex processes of power relations more or less invisible. According to Bourdieu (1989), this differential positioning of actors

make possible a multitude of possible structurings of the social world, as the way individual actors perceive the world is informed by his or her position in social space. However, there is a symbolic struggle over the power to produce and impose the legitimate vision of the world, the power of ‘world making’ (Bourdieu 1989).

Why choose an intersectional approach to this material? Yuval-Davis argues that “[t]he point of intersectional analysis is to identify the differential ways in which different social divisions are concretely enmeshed and constructed by each other and how they relate to political and subjective constructions of identity” (Yuval-Davis 2006:205). Which differences are considered socially and politically relevant is determined by historical structures of domination (Yuval-Davis 1997:10). I argue that the Turkish oppression of Kurdish identity contributes to make my informants’ Kurdish identity central in their interpretation of themselves and their own position in social space: While the Turkish state has tried to create Turks out of all the citizens of Turkey since 1923, Kurds have proposed an alternative vision of society, with the ethnic division between Kurds and Turks as the relevant division in society – the division marking the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’. This alternative view is articulated through the symbols outlined above, conveying a sense of commonality, common origins and common destiny.

Both during my fieldwork and while processing the data, the intersectional framework has been helpful in constantly reminding me that although my informants emphasised that they were Kurdish, and often explained their situation in light of their ethnic belonging, they are simultaneously situated according to the other social divisions that I have described through this dissertation. As Cohen argues: “The subordination of self to society is achieved by power” (1994:76). Yuval-Davis notes that:

In a specific historical context – or even in most concrete historical situations – people are not scattered randomly along the different axes of power of different social divisions. Often people who are positioned in a specific location along one such axis also tend to concentrate in a specific location of another one”

Yuval-Davis 2006:200

The use of cultural resources, especially symbolic border guards, are important in the continuous (re)construction of collectivities and collective identities and the management of their boundaries. However, the ability of ‘cultural stuff’, in our case

the multivocal symbols of Kurdish identity, to withstand differential usage and meanings makes it easier for hegemonic cultural projects to become naturalised (Yuval-Davis 1997:67).

Intersectionality has served as a tool, both methodologically and analytically, to deconstruct the positions of my informants. It has rendered visible how the intersecting grids of power that constitutes the position of individuals co-construct one another, and some of the reasons why Ayşe and Aynur, both of them young, Kurdish women in Istanbul, interpret their situations so differently.

My question of how young Kurds in Istanbul experience their lives introduced me to the multiple ways my informants create ethnicity for themselves (Cohen 1994), as well as to how their social positioning influences their resources for doing so. It enabled me to differentiate between categories of positionality and social identities, to see the ways in which my informants both strengthen and problematise the boundary of their ethnic identity. Ayşe sees the oppression of her Kurdish identity by the Turkish state as the main reason for her unprivileged situation. Aynur, on the other hand, struggles to stay Kurdish. Going to school and planning to continue her studies in university implies constant interaction with the Turkish majority, an interaction that challenges her view of herself as Kurdish.

Comaroff (1996:162) illuminates the ambiguity of the politics of identity, of which ethnic and nationalist consciousness is one example: he describes it as “having had both a liberatory and a dark side”. The endurance of the Kurdish struggle has been fruiticious: Their language has survived, although fragmented, and they have kept a sense of collective identity. This accomplishment has, however, had larger costs for some than for others. Comaroff (1996:180-181) poses what he finds to be crucial, unanswered questions in connection with identity politics: “Precisely how do collective attachments take root in the histories people imagine they share? ... When and why does nationality take priority over other forms of identity – specifically, social class, ethnicity, gender, race?” To answer these questions, he argues that ethnicity and nationalism must be situated in “the broader context of the consciousness of race, class, gender, and generation”.

I argue that one way of answering the questions of how individual lives are affected by ethno-nationalist struggles like that of the Kurds, is through non-spectacular stories like those of Ayşe’s decision to stay at home, and Aynur’s troubles getting through her days in school.

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